Discovering Christ in ACTS

Life after Pentecost

Don Fortner, 1950-2020

1. "YOU SHALL BE WITNESSES UNTO ME"

Acts 1:1–8

The Book of Acts is an inspired history of the apostolic ministry of the early church, covering a period of thirty to thirty-five years. The central theme throughout the book is the ascension and Lordship of Jesus Christ. It was written by Luke, who was also author of the gospel narrative bearing his name. Acts begins where the Gospel of Luke ends, with the ascension of Christ. It is a history of the church of Christ in its infancy, showing God's constant care and special providence for it. In these first verses five important lessons are set before us.

First, THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IS THE ONLY LAWGIVER IN HIS CHURCH (verses 1–2). Luke makes a connection between his gospel and the Book of Acts. Both were written specifically for a man named Theophilus (Luke 1:3), a man of rank and honor. Not many noble are called (1 Corinthians 1:26), but some are. God has chosen some of all ranks. Theophilus means either "lover of God" or "loved of God".

Luke describes his gospel as "a treatise of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up." Though they did not record every word and deed of Christ (John 21:25), Luke and the other gospel writers did record all that the Holy Spirit inspired, all that we need to know, particularly all that Christ did and said relating to the salvation of his people; his obedience to God, his conformity to the law, and his death as our Substitute, by which he brought in everlasting righteousness and obtained eternal redemption for us.

Christ gave his commandments by the Holy Spirit to chosen apostles, and by them to his church. All the doctrines and ordinances, faith and practice of the church are, by the commandment of Christ, laid down in the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16).

Secondly, OUR LORD JESUS GAVE MANY INFALLIBLE PROOFS OF HIS RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD (v. 3). Our Savior appeared to his disciples many times, publicly and privately, giving irrefutable proof of his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:5). He spent forty days on the earth after his resurrection, eating and drinking, walking and talking with his disciples, showing them his hands and side, and teaching them things concerning the kingdom of God. The testimony of those honest men and women who saw the risen Christ cannot be rejected except by those who are willfully ignorant.

Thirdly, THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE PROMISE OF THE FATHER (verses 4–5). There are thousands of promises in the Bible, but only the promise of the Spirit is called "the promise of the Father." God the Father promised that he would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh in the last day (Joel 2:28), and Christ promised his disciples the gift of the Spirit from the Father (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7; 7:37–39; Galatians 3:13–14).

Fourthly, EVEN THE MOST GIFTED AND USEFUL MEN IN THE WORLD ARE ONLY FALLIBLE MEN AND ARE SOMETIMES CONFUSED (verses 6–7). "Lord, will you at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" They were curious about the fulfillment of prophecy. They did not yet understand the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom. These were faithful, believing men, loyal to Christ; but they were only men. Being men, they were confused about the kingdom of Christ. Learn two things from this verse:

1. There are no infallible men in this world! The apostles themselves were not infallible. They wrote the Holy Scriptures by the infallible direction of God the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). What they wrote is the infallible, inerrant Word of God. But the apostles themselves were just men, sinners saved by grace!

2. We ought to be patient and forbearing with one another's faults, weaknesses and failures. Our Lord did not show the least bit of anger toward his erring disciples. Certainly we should be as kind to one another (Ephesians 4:32).

The lesson of verse seven is one we need often to be reminded of—There are some things God does not intend for us to know! No one on earth knows when Christ will come again, or when the end of the world will be. Indeed, there are many things known only to God. We must never pry into that which God has not revealed (Deuteronomy 29:29). We are to search the scriptures, studying the Word of God, that we might know those things he has revealed concerning himself, us, his Son, and his salvation.

Fifthly, OUR LORD PLAINLY TELLS US WHAT THE LIFELONG WORK AND RESPONSIBILITY OF EVERY BELIEVER IS (v. 8). "You shall be witnesses unto me" (Isaiah 43:10, 12; 44:8; Luke 24:48). Notice two things in this eighth verse.

1. "You shall receive power after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you." Without question, this refers to the special, apostolic power that came upon those men chosen to be our Lord's apostles. Yet, it certainly has meaning for us today. No one can ever be saved, serve God, or lay down his life in the cause of Christ as his witness until the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit comes upon him in regeneration. "Salvation is of the Lord!" It is by God's grace alone (Romans 11:6; Ephesians 2:8–9).

2. When the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit comes upon you, the Son of God says, "You shall be witnesses unto me." A witness is one who accurately and honestly relates to others that which he has heard with his own ears, seen with his own eyes, and felt and experienced in his own heart. He does not relate secondhand information. He declares only what he himself knows to be true (1 John 1:1–3). It is the privilege, responsibility, and honor of every believer to be a witness for Christ in his generation. This is every believer's calling and vocation in this world. Every true Christian is a missionary. Every true believer is an evangelist. Every true follower of Christ is a preacher. Every true child of God is his witness. The word witness is the word from which we get the word martyr. Christ's witnesses are his martyrs, people who lay down their lives in the cause of Christ! Go ahead and work your job, so that you can pay the expenses of life; but do not forget that your calling, your life's work is to be his witness. Let nothing interfere with that!

2. "THIS SAME JESUS"

Acts 1:9–11

These three verses of Holy Scripture are both solemn and delightful, instructive and practical. They speak of the glorious ascension and second advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. Having finished his work upon the earth (John 19:30), our Lord Jesus, the God-man, ascended into Heaven and assumed his rightful place upon the throne of God, as King of kings and Lord of lords (John 17:1–5; Romans 14:9; Philippians 2:5–11; Hebrews 1:3; 10:12–14). Even so, when he has finished his work in Heaven, our Savior will come again to this earth in power and great glory (Rev. 1:7; 19:11–17; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; 2 Thessalonians 1:8–10; John 14:1–3). Here are four things that are of paramount importance. Be sure you understand them.

First, THE LORD JESUS CHRIST HAS ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN. "And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight" (v. 9; Luke 24:50–52). What is the meaning of the ascension? Why was the Lord Jesus taken up into Heaven? What happened to the Son of God when he went back to glory clothed in human flesh? What is he doing in Heaven? All these questions are plainly answered in the Word of God. Read the answers for yourself (Psalm 2:6–8; 68:17–20; 110:1–4; Isaiah 53:10–12; John 16:7; Acts 2:25–36; 4:11–12; 5:30–32; Ephesians 4:8–12; Philippians 2:5–11; Hebrews 10:12–14).

Christ Jesus ascended back into Heaven to claim his rightful place as King of the universe (Daniel 7:13–14). The Father's reward to the Son for his mediatorial obedience as our Substitute is dominion over all things (Psalm 2:8). God the Father has put all things into the hands of and under the rule of Jesus Christ, the God-man.

In Heaven the Son of God is carrying on his great intercessory work as our Advocate and High Priest. Entering into Heaven with his own blood, he sat down upon the throne of God, having obtained eternal redemption for us (Hebrews 9:12). By virtue of that blood he offers continual intercession for his redeemed people (Romans 8:34; 1 John 2:1–2). And through the virtue of his blood all the blessings of grace are bestowed upon God's elect (Ephesians 1:3–6).

The exalted Christ has claimed and taken possession of Heaven as the Forerunner of his people (Hebrews 6:14, 16–20). He has claimed all the inheritance of heaven's glory for all God's elect, for all for whom his blood was shed, for all who shall believe on him.

Our Savior took his place upon the throne of glory to secure the everlasting salvation of all his redeemed ones. He reigns in life to save those he purchased in death (Romans 5:10). He rules all things for the salvation of his people (John 17:2; Romans 8:28). In a word, Christ has gone to prepare a place in the Father's house for all his adopted sons and daughters, and he will bring them there.

Secondly, THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IS COMING AGAIN. "And while they looked steadfastly toward Heaven as he went up, behold two men stood by them in white apparel, which also said, You men of Galilee, why stand you gazing up into Heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into Heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into Heaven" (verses 10–11). God sent two angels with this word of promise to his beloved children upon the earth, so that we might constantly live in anticipation of it—Christ is coming again! This promise ought to cheer our hearts, enliven our souls, and encourage our hope. God has not told us when Christ is coming. He does not intend for us to know the time of our Lord's appearing. But the second advent of Christ is a matter of certainty. It should be, to every believer, a matter of imminent expectancy (Hebrews 9:26–28; Zechariah 14:4, 5, 9; Matthew 16:27; 24:27; John 14:1–3; Philippians 3:20; 1 Thessalonians 4:16;

2 Timothy 4:8; Titus 2:13; James 5:7–8; Jude 14; Rev. 1:7; 22:20). Here are four things revealed in the Scriptures about the Lord's coming.

1. Christ's second coming will be a personal, bodily advent (Rev. 1:7).

2. It will be a glorious appearing (2 Thessalonians 1:7–10).

3. It will be the consummation of our salvation (Romans 13:11; Ephesians 1:14).

4. Our Lord will appear suddenly, without warning, as a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:1–6).

Thirdly, OUR LORD'S SECOND ADVENT WILL BE THE CLIMATIC CONSUMMATION OF GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE (Acts 3:19–21; 1 Corinthians 15:24–28). Reading the Scriptures, it appears that once our Lord Jesus appears in his second advent everything after that will happen with great speed. With great swiftness, the Lord God will wrap up his work among men. The resurrection of the dead, the judgment, the conflagration of the earth and new creation, the final separation of the righteous and the wicked, all seem to take place in a matter of moments!

There will be A GENERAL RESURRECTION (John 5:28–29). The dead shall be raised. The living saints shall be changed, translated in a moment and gathered out of the earth. All men will stand before God and be judged by him. According to the strict standards of inflexible justice, everyone will receive exactly his due. The righteous, made righteous by grace, shall inherit glory. The wicked shall be cast into Hell.

There will be A GREAT REGENERATION (2 Peter 3:9–14). Our God shall indeed make all things new! There will be a new heavens and a new earth where nothing dwells but righteousness!

There will be A GLOBAL RECONCILIATION (Rev. 5:13). The Lord God will demonstrate to all creation how that all creation has served his purpose and brought glory to him.

Then there will be A GLORIOUS REST (Hebrews 4:9). The Triune God and all the countless multitude of his elect will enter into an eternal Sabbath. In heaven's glory we will rest from all our troubles and from all our works. There we shall worship our God perfectly, serve him without labor, and love him completely!

Fourthly, THE ONE WHO IS COMING FOR US IS "THIS SAME JESUS!" The angelic messengers assure us that our Lord will never forget his people. The One coming to bring us home to glory is the very same Jesus who died to redeem us. "This same Jesus" who is full of love and sympathy,—"This same Jesus" who brought in everlasting righteousness,—"This same Jesus" who has gone into Heaven for us, who now appears in the presence of God for us, who sits upon the throne of universal dominion, ruling all things for us,—"This same Jesus" shall come again!

3. FAITHFUL BUT FALLIBLE LEADERS

Acts 1:12–26

Acts 1:12–26 covers a brief waiting period (about one week) between the ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The things that are recorded here were written by Luke, by divine inspiration, for our learning and admonition. If we are wise, we will lay them to heart.

First, THE LORD JESUS CHRIST FULFILLED EVERY PROPHECY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES RELATING TO HIS INCARNATION, LIFE, EARTHLY MINISTRY, CRUCIFIXION, RESURRECTION, AND ASCENSION (v. 12). When Luke tells us that the disciples returned from the mount called Olivet to Jerusalem, he is, almost casually, telling us that Christ stood upon Mt. Olivet when he ascended to Heaven, just like the prophet Zechariah said he would (Zechariah 14:4; Ezekiel 11:23). The mount had been divided in two parts by a great earthquake in the days of Uzziah. Our Lord ascended from that part of it which was near Bethany (Luke 24:50). It was there that he began his sufferings (Luke 22:39). It was most fitting therefore that he should cast off the reproach of his sufferings there by his glorious ascension.

Second, THE PATH OF BLESSEDNESS AND USEFULNESS IS THE PATH OF OBEDIENCE (verses 12–14). The disciples returned to Jerusalem because the Lord commanded them to do so (v. 4). There their enemies awaited them. There they were most likely to suffer and be persecuted. But the Lord's commandment was clear. So they returned (Proverbs 3:5–6). There in a large upper room, they met together in prayer, united in heart, waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit. Much needed to be done. They had a message to proclaim. Sinners were perishing. But the Lord had commanded them to wait. So they waited. They were waiting upon the Lord, waiting for God to move, waiting for God to come upon them, waiting for God to open the door before them (Psalm 27:14; 62:5–7; Chronicles 15:13). We must obey his Word and wait for his direction. In all things, the point of our responsibility is the commandment of God. We must obey him. Obeying his Word, the disciples were filled with the Spirit and greatly used of God for much good.

Thirdly, EVEN THE BEST OF MEN ARE ONLY MEN AT BEST (verses 15–26). So long as we are in this world we will be prone to error and sin. We stray in many ways and err in many things. Even true, faithful servants of God are weak, fallible men of flesh and blood. This is manifest in the fact that Peter led the disciples to choose an apostle God had not chosen.

Without question, Peter was a faithful man. He had the heart of a true pastor. On other occasions he acted rashly from bad motives, but not here. His motives were good. He wanted what was best for the glory of God, the people of God, and the gospel of God. The sin of Judas had made a vacancy in the apostolic office. Twelve apostles were originally chosen and ordained. As there were twelve tribes in Israel, descended from the twelve patriarchs, so there were twelve apostles. They are the twelve stars which make up the church's crown (Rev. 12:1). For them, twelve thrones were reserved (Matthew 19:28). Peter read Psalm 69:25 and concluded that it was the responsibility of the church to fill the vacancy left by Judas' apostasy. His error was an error of judgment, not of motive or principle.

He humbly recognized the sovereignty of God in all that had happened (v. 16). He understood that the death of Christ was the work of God for the redemption of his people (Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). He realized that God had sovereignly overruled the evil deeds of Judas to accomplish his own eternal purpose (Psalm 41:9).

Peter sorrowfully remembered the fall of his former friend and companion (v. 17–19). He said no more about the subject than was necessary. Though he and Judas had been close friends, he bowed to the will of God and honored the judgment of God upon his friend. Peter knew that the only difference between him and Judas was the grace of God (1 Corinthians 4:7).

He reverenced and honored the Word of God (v. 20). Peter sincerely wanted to obey the Scriptures. He thought he was doing what God would have him do. He was motivated by an earnest desire for the glory of God. With genuine reverence, he sought the will of God (verses 21–25).

Peter should have sought the Lord before he appointed Justus and Matthias. Never say to God, "Lord, I am going to do this or that, you choose which you want me to do." Rather, go to God and say, "What will you have me to do?"

When the lots were cast, Peter led the church to ordain an apostle God had not chosen (v. 26). It was true, the Lord's intention was for his church to have twelve apostles, twelve and only twelve. David's prophecy must be fulfilled. Another apostle must take Judas' place. But, like the others, he must be personally chosen and ordained to the office by Christ himself. The Lord had not chosen Justus or Matthias for this office. He had chosen Paul (1 Corinthians 15:8).

How could Peter have made such a mistake? He sought to determine the will of God by casting lots. Like David, he made the mistake of seeking to determine the will of God by seeking the will of the people (1 Chronicles 13:1–4). He tried to accomplish the will and work of God by the wisdom and energy of the flesh! As a result, Matthias was chosen to do what God had not gifted him to do. So far as we know, he never preached a sermon or wrote an epistle. We can only speculate about what became of him. But his name is never mentioned again. Where God ordained twelve apostles there was neither room nor need for thirteen!

Still, Peter was God's appointed leader for that early church. In spite of his many errors, faults, and falls, Peter was God's man, and the people of God rightfully submitted to his rule as their pastor (Hebrews 13:7, 17). Though he was a fallible man, he was a faithful man. He preached the gospel of Christ, sought the will of God, lived for the glory of God, and served the people of God. Blessed is that congregation who has been given such a pastor after God's own heart (Jeremiah 3:15). Faithful pastors do sin. Faithful pastors do err in judgment. Faithful pastors do even err in doctrine. Faithful pastors do make mistakes. Faithful pastors need the prayers and the love of God's people (1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13, 25; Hebrews 13:18).

4. "WHAT MEANS THIS?"

Acts 2:1–13

The events of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2 rightfully claim the attention of the church of God. Here Luke records for us the great outpouring of God the Holy Spirit upon his church. Let us carefully and prayerfully study what happened on that great day. Some try to fabricate a reenactment of Pentecost, while others simply ignore it as an event in history which has no relevance to the church today. Both are in error. While we recognize that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit were temporary signs, given for specific purposes, we also realize that the events of that great day have an application to God's church today. What the Holy Spirit was then, he is now. He is God who changes not. Whatever he did for the church of God at Pentecost, he is able to do for the church of God today. His power has not diminished. God the Holy Spirit is still with the church of Christ in this world. We should expect his divine work among us!

WHAT WAS PENTECOST? It was one of three great feasts given by the commandment of God (

Leviticus 23:4–21). The reason why there was such a great crowd at Jerusalem was the fact that God required every male Israelite to attend these feasts every year.

First, The Feast of Passover (Leviticus 23:4–8). Actually, this feast originated in Egypt (Exodus 12:1–13). When the judgment of God fell upon Egypt the Passover lamb was sacrificed. The blood of the lamb was put on the door of every house in Israel. When judgment fell, God looked on the blood and passed over every house where blood was on the door. The Passover lamb represented Christ, the Lamb of God, who was sacrificed for us (1 Corinthians 5:7), by whose blood we are saved. He kept the Passover feast with his disciples just before he was crucified. It was then that he instituted the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:17–30).

Second, The Feast of First fruits (Leviticus 23:9–11). On Sunday after the Passover Sabbath Israel brought a handful of the first fruits of harvest and waved it before the Lord. This signified that every product of the soil, every result of man's labor and toil is from God. It was on this day that our Lord arose from the grave and became the first fruits of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). All the results of his work on the cross, our redemption and resurrection, are of God.

Third, The Feast of Pentecost (Leviticus 23:15–21) was held seven weeks after the Passover. Here the Jews renewed their vows and dedicated themselves anew to the Lord God. It was on this day that the Holy Spirit was given as our Savior had promised.

WHEN DID THE HOLY SPIRIT COME UPON THE APOSTLES? (v. 1). He came at the divinely appointed time, "when the day of Pentecost was fully come." Once Christ ascended back to Heaven and was exalted, the Spirit was given (Psalm 68:18–19; Ephesians 4:7–12; Galatians 3:13–14). It was Sunday morning. The disciples were gathered for worship in the appointed place. They were all with one accord, in prayer and expectation (Acts 1:14), waiting for the promise of the Spirit. The blessings of God always attend such unity and obedience (Psalm 133:1–3; Matthew 18:20). But strife and division grieve the Spirit and drive him away (Ephesians 4:30).

WHAT WERE THE SYMBOLS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S PRESENCE? (verses 2–3). The wind is a symbol of deity, therefore, a proper emblem of the Spirit. In fact, both the Hebrew and the Greek words for wind and the Spirit are the same. Wind is frequently used to represent the power and presence of God (Ezekiel 37:9; Job 38:1). The sound of rushing, mighty wind symbolizes the irresistible power of grace which comes by the Spirit of God (John 3:8; Psalm 65:4; 110:3). Like the wind, God is uncontrolled by man, sovereign, almighty, and irresistible in all his works!

The fire is also an emblem of divinity. God appeared to Abraham as a burning lamp (Genesis 15:17) and to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:1–6). The symbol of his presence with Israel was a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21–22). He showed himself for Elijah by devouring fire (1 Kings 18:38). Isaiah's lips were cleansed by a live coal of fire (Isaiah 6:1–8). "Our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29). Like fire, the Spirit of God illuminates the people of God (John 16:13–14; 1 Corinthians 2:11–14). Like fire, he gives power to energize and invigorate the church of God and the servants of God. Without him we can do nothing. With him there is nothing we cannot do!

WHAT WERE THE IMMEDIATE EFFECTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S PRESENCE? (verses 4–11). First, "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit." Oh, that we might each be filled with the Spirit! To be filled with the Spirit is to be controlled by him (Ephesians 5:18–20). It is to be filled with his grace (Galatians 5:22–23), filled with his comfort (John 14:16–18), and filled with his influence (Romans 8:14). Second, they "began to speak with other tongues (languages), as the Spirit gave them utterance." The gift of tongues was the ability to speak a language that had not been learned (verses 6–11). It was not the meaningless repetition of unintelligible sounds! This gift was a temporary gift bestowed upon the apostles, identifying them as God's inspired messengers and confirming their writings as the Word of God (Hebrews 2:3–4). Because we have the complete revelation of God in Holy Scripture, there is no need for supernatural gifts (miracles, tongues, etc.) to confirm God's revelation (1 Corinthians 13:10; 2 Peter 1:19). The Spirit is the same today as he was then, but he does not manifest himself in the same way. Yet, three things always give evidence of the Spirit's presence and power in the church.

1. He enables God's servants to preach with power (v. 4).

2. He enables chosen sinners to hear, understand, and believe the gospel of Christ (v. 6; 1 Thessalonians 1:5).

3. He makes the gospel a savor of life to some and death to others (verses 11–13; 2 Corinthians 2:14–16).

WHAT WAS THE SUBJECT PREACHED BY THE APOSTLES? They all declared "the wonderful works of God" (v. 11). Just read Peter's sermon and you will see what those wonderful works of God are. On that day, as on all other occasions in the Book of Acts and on any day when a man preaches by the power of God the Holy Spirit, the subject matter was Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). The words "preach", "preaching", and "preached" appear 37 times in the Book of Acts. Every time they have reference to the preaching of Christ. We will look at it in more detail in our next study, but notice what Peter preached on the day of Pentecost.

1. Free Salvation through the Merits of Christ (v. 21).

2. The Glorious Sovereignty of God (v. 23).

3. The Desperate Wickedness and Depravity of Man (v. 23).

4. The Crucifixion and Death of Christ (v. 23).

5. The Exaltation and Glory of Christ (verses 32–36).

6. Repentance and the Remission of Sins by the Gift God (verses 38–40).

Let us pray for the presence and power of God the Holy Spirit to attend the assemblies of God's church today (Isaiah 64:1–2).

"Spirit divine! Attend our prayers, And make God's house Your home; Descend with all Your gracious powers, Oh come, great Spirit, come!"

5. PENTECOST—THE REVELATION OF THE SOVEREIGN CHRIST

Acts 2:14–36

We have before us the sermon which Peter preached on the day of Pentecost. It is remarkably simple. It displays no great learning. It contains no heights of oratory. It contains no thrilling stories or illustrations. It is a simple declaration of divine truth, delivered to the hearts of men by the power of God. There is nothing in it to impress the flesh. But there is much here to prick the heart! The one object of Peter's sermon at Pentecost and the one object of the Holy Spirit who inspired it was to set forth before fallen, guilty, needy sinners the redemptive accomplishments and resurrection glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, PETER EXPLAINED THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHAT HAPPENED ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST (verses 14–21). Peter met these men where they were. They were mocking the apostles upon whom the Holy Spirit had fallen. They attempted to explain away the work of the Spirit which they could not understand (1 Corinthians 2:14) by saying that those men who spoke by the Spirit of God were drunk (v. 13). Peter stood, lifted up his voice with confidence and boldness, and said, "Listen to me. I will explain to you from the Word of God, which you profess to believe, what is happening in your midst. This marvelous outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy" (Joel 2:28–32). Joel identified the Messiah positively by giving a fourfold proof of his enthronement and the establishment of his kingdom. These things point to the Lord Jesus Christ and say, "This is the Messiah!"

1. "The last days" began with the coming of the Messiah (1 John 2:18). "The last days" encompass the whole space of time from the first advent to the second advent of Christ.

2. The Spirit of God has been poured out upon all flesh, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor (verses 17–18; Galatians 3:13–14; Colossians 3:11). Though men in the Old Testament were from time to time filled with the Spirit (1 Peter 1:11; Nehemiah 9:20), this great outpouring of the Spirit was reserved as a signal that Christ has come and his kingdom has been established. People in the Old Testament were regenerated by the Spirit of God just as they are today (John 3:3–8). Yet, the works of God's grace were primarily limited to the nation of Israel. Now his grace is scattered throughout the nations of the world.

NOTE: As noted in the previous lesson, the miraculous gifts of tongues, prophecy, visions, etc. were temporary. They were given to announce the enthronement of Christ. It should also be noted that as early as Paul's first letter to the Corinthians God forbade any kind of public ministry by women (1 Corinthians 14:26, 34).

3. The judgment of God has fallen upon the nation of Israel for their rejection and crucifixion of Christ (verses 19–20; Matthew 22:7). Joel described God's judgment of Israel in figurative symbols. Because of their contempt of the gospel, God destroyed the civil government of Israel as a nation and turned the light he had given them into darkness (Luke 19:41–44; 23:28–29; Romans 11:7–11, 25). Blinded Israel stands as a beacon to warn all who trifle with the things of God (Romans 1:21; Proverbs 1:23–33).

4. The gospel of the grace of God is now proclaimed to all the nations of the world (v. 21). God now gathers his elect from among the Gentiles by the preaching of the gospel according to his wise and sovereign purpose of grace (Psalm 2:7–8; Romans 10:10–13). This is the meaning of Pentecost. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit declares that Christ has come, redeemed his people, and established his kingdom. At last, God's promise to Abraham is fulfilled (Galatians 3:13–14).

Secondly, PETER PROCLAIMED THE PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST (verses 22–24). He seems to have anticipated a question which the Jews, whose hands were freshly stained with the blood of Christ, might ask—"If this Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of God, if he has established his kingdom, how do you explain the fact that we have nailed him to the cross?"

"Jesus of Nazareth" was "a man approved of God" as the God-man (v. 22). His claims to divinity (John 8:56; 14:9; Romans 9:5; 1 Timothy 3:16) were proved by his miracles. Those miracles performed by Christ were indisputable facts of public record. They could not be disputed even by his murderers. That man who turned water to wine, calmed the raging sea, gave sight to the blind, fed the multitudes, cleansed lepers, and raised the dead is God!

How did Christ, the God-man, come to die the painful, shameful death of the cross? (Read v. 23). The death of Christ was an act of God (Romans 5:8; 8:32; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Isaiah 53:10). He was foreordained and predestined to be our substitutionary sacrifice (1 Peter 1:18–20; Rev. 13:8; Hebrews 13:20). The only way sinners could be saved is by the satisfaction of justice. The only One who could satisfy justice is the Son of God. And the only way he could do it was by death (Hebrews 9:22), the death of the cross (Galatians 3:13). Yet, Christ died by the hands of wicked men, acting according to their own freewill. If nothing else convinces men of the abhorrence of freewill doctrine, this should—Freewill crucified the Lord of Glory!

By his resurrection from the dead our Savior abolished death (v. 24). He abolished the penal aspect of death for his people. He abolished its power, its terror, and its fears for all who believe (Hebrews 2:15). The resurrection of Christ was God's public declaration that justice has been satisfied for his people's sins (Romans 4:25–5:1).

Thirdly, PETER GIVES PROOF FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES THAT THE MESSIAH MUST BOTH SUFFER DEATH AND BE RESURRECTED BY THE POWER OF GOD (verses 25–31). Quoting Psalm 16:8–11, the Apostle shows that David's words were a prophecy of Christ's death, resurrection, and exaltation. In all that he did, our Redeemer sought the glory of God, doing his Father's will. He said, "I foresaw the Lord always before my face" (John 12:28–32; 17:4–5). He was, as a man, sustained and strengthened in his work by the assurance of his Father's presence. He said, "He is on my right hand, that I should not be moved" (Isaiah 50:5–7). Our Savior faced his greatest trial with joyful confidence that he would, by his obedience unto death, both obtain the place of highest glory and save his people (verses 26–28; Philippians 2:5–11; Hebrews 12:1–3). In all theses things, the person spoken of was not David, but David's Lord, Jesus Christ (verses 29–31).

May God give us grace ever to follow our Redeemer's example, doing the will of God for the glory of God, being sustained by the awareness that God is with us, rejoicing always in the hope of everlasting glory.

Fourthly, PETER DECLARES THAT JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, HAS BEEN GIVEN DOMINION AS LORD OVER ALL GOD'S CREATION (verses 32–36). In our next lesson we will study these verses more fully, but here are two facts that all men must face.

1. That Christ whom we have crucified is now the exalted King of Heaven and earth (verses 32–33, 36).

2. Sooner or later we must all bow to and acknowledge the rightful dominion and Lordship of Jesus Christ (verses 34–35).

6. "BOTH LORD AND CHRIST"

Acts 2:32–36

The subject before us in these verses is the exaltation and glory of Jesus Christ as Lord. This was the issue Peter pressed upon his hearers on the day of Pentecost. He did not ask them to lift their hands, walk down the aisle, come to the altar, or say the sinner's prayer. The cheap tricks of easy-believism had not yet been invented. Peter demanded as God's ambassador that those who heard him bow to, trust, and acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord.

Peter shows us in this part of his sermon that the singular purpose for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was to announce the exaltation of Christ as Lord. The outpouring of the Spirit was not in any way a change in God's plan. It did not alter God's method of grace in salvation. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was not the beginning of "the church age", or a new "dispensational age". This mighty outpouring announced the exaltation of Christ. The exaltation and glory of Christ as Lord over all things is the theme of all gospel preaching, the acknowledgment of all true faith, and the ground of the believer's hope.

We must understand this—The one issue between God and man is the Lordship of Jesus Christ. God demands that all men bow to and acknowledge the rightful dominion of his Son over all things. All men will bow to Christ, either in this life in repentance and faith, or in the day of judgment, but all will bow to Christ (Phi. 2:9–11).

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR SAVIOR'S EXALTATION? Peter tells us that Christ is indeed exalted. The baby of Bethlehem is now the King of glory. The man we nailed to the cursed tree now sits upon the throne of universal dominion. The King of glory has come into his kingdom and taken possession of his throne (Psalm 24:7–10). What does that mean? What is the significance of Christ's exaltation?

First, Christ upon the throne means that his work is finished and complete (Hebrews 1:1–3; 10:10–14). Our great High Priest is pictured as a Priest seated in the holy of holies, in Heaven itself. In the Old Testament there was no chair in the holy place. Those priests could never sit down, because their work was never finished. Their sacrifices could never take away sin (Hebrews 10:1–4). But our High Priest is seated in Heaven, in a posture of rest, because his work is finished! All that was agreed upon in the covenant of grace he has done (John 17:4). He came to do his Father's will, and he has done it completely. He brought in, by his obedience in life, perfect righteousness for God's elect. By his death he satisfied all the demands of God's law and justice as our Substitute (Isaiah 59:16; 63:1–5; John 19:30).

Second, Christ's exaltation upon the throne of glory means that God the Father has accepted the sacrifice of his Son for the salvation of his people (Romans 8:34). The believer's assurance that sin is pardoned is the ascension and exaltation of Christ. If Christ who was made to be sin for us is now exalted with everlasting glory upon the throne of God, then our sins that were imputed to him are gone forever! His blood has indeed put away our sins!

Third, the exaltation of Christ proclaims reconciliation between God and man (Colossians 1:18–22). There is a man in glory whose righteousness has been accepted, whose death has satisfied the very justice of God. The debt for sin has been fully paid. Godhood and manhood are in perfect harmony in Christ, the God-man. Therefore, there is hope for men.

Fourth, the exalted Christ is able to save fallen men (Hebrews 7:25). Christ on the throne is able to save all who come to God by him. Christ on the throne is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. Christ on the throne is able to keep you from falling and to present you holy, unblamable, and unreprovable before the presence of his glory!

WHAT IS THE EXALTED SON OF GOD DOING IN HEAVEN? He is enjoying the honor and dignity he won as our Mediator. In his divinity, as God, our Savior has always enjoyed the bliss and glory of total sovereignty. Though he humbled himself as a man, even unto the death of the cross, he never ceased to be God over all! But as a man the Lord Jesus Christ earned the right to rule the entire universe (Romans 14:9; Philippians 2:9–11). He enjoys the highest honor that Heaven affords. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. And his honor is well deserved honor (Rev. 5:9–10).

The exalted Christ is ruling this world in total sovereignty (John 17:1–4; 1 Peter 3:22). He is the only Potentate (1 Timothy 6:15). He rules all things according to the eternal purpose and pleasure of God for the salvation and eternal, spiritual good of God's elect. And he rules all things well (Romans 8:28).

Christ, exalted in Heaven, is making intercession for chosen sinners according to the will of God (Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1–2). On the basis of his perfect righteousness and blood atonement, he pleads with the Father for the salvation of his redeemed ones, the non-imputation of sin to them, and their presence with him in glory at last (John 17:24), and he always prevails!

The exaltation of Christ is a representative exaltation. That is to say, he was exalted as the representative of God's elect and we are already exalted with him (Ephesians 2:5–6). So certain is the salvation of God's elect, so certain it is that Christ's redeemed ones shall possess the glory of an eternal inheritance in Heaven, that we are already possessors of it in Christ!

WHAT HAS THE EXALTED REDEEMER BEEN PROMISED? When he was exalted to the right hand of the majesty on high, God the Father promised his Son that he would make all his foes his footstool (Hebrews 1:5, 8–13). It is virtually done now and it shall be carried out in all the universe. As he promised to make all Christ's enemies his footstool, the Father also promised the Son that he would save all his ransomed people (Isaiah 53:10–12; Hebrews 2:13). As I said before, all men and women will bow to Christ. You will either bow to him in faith, surrendering to his rule now, or you will bow to him in fear and trembling, acknowledging his sovereign justice in the day of judgment, but bow to him you shall (Isaiah 45:23–25).

"WHAT SHALL WE DO?" (Acts 2:37). The people who heard Peter's message had sense enough to realize that there is only one way to deal with an absolute sovereign. We must bow to his claims, acknowledging his lordship over all things (Romans 10:9–10; 1 Corinthians 12:3). True faith involves surrender to the rule and dominion of Christ as a willing servant to him (Luke 14:25–33). Where there is no surrender there is no faith!

Let every believer rejoice. Christ is exalted. Christ is Lord. That means—All is well! Let us trust him in all things, rejoice in him in all circumstances, walk before him in submissive faith, and wait for him with hope and expectation (

1 John 3:2).

7. "THE LORD ADDED TO THE CHURCH"

Acts 2:37–47

Peter's sermon was exceedingly simple. There were no illustrations, no stirring stories, no marvelous points of logic, no soaring heights of oratory. The Apostle simply declared the truth of God, boldly exposing the sin of his hearers and explaining the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. But every word he spoke was carried to the hearts of chosen sinners by the effectual power and grace of God the Holy Spirit. When the day was over three thousand men and women had been converted by the power of God, saved, and added to the church. Here two lessons are clearly taught and illustrated that every preacher, teacher, church leader, and church member should learn and lay to heart.

First, SALVATION IS THE WORK OF GOD ALONE (verses 37–41). When Peter had finished preaching, those whose hearts had been pricked by the Word of God cried, "What shall we do?" Like all men, once they were awakened to a sense of their sin and of God's just wrath against them, these men hoped to do something by which they could be saved. We are all legalists by nature! These men wanted to know what they could do to atone for their sins, to sit things right with God, to appease his wrath, and win his favor. "What shall we do?" What a foolish question! Salvation does not come by something man does. Salvation is the result of what God does (Romans 3:28; 11:6; Ephesians 2:8–9; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5). In verses 37–41 the Holy Spirit gives us a beautiful, clear picture of God's method of grace.

When God intends to save a sinner, he causes that sinner to hear the gospel preached in the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 37). "When they heard this," the gospel of God's sovereign purpose of grace in the redemptive work of Christ (v. 23) and the exaltation and glory of Christ as Lord (verses 32–36), "they were pricked in their heart." God saves sinners through the preaching of the gospel (Romans 10:13–17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23–25). In his wise and sovereign providence God brings the sinner to whom he will be gracious under the sound of a gospel preacher's voice. As he brought Philip to the Ethiopian Eunuch, brought Peter to Cornelius, brought Paul to Lydia, the Philippian Jailor, and "the Barbarous people" of Melita, and brought Onesimus to Paul, so God always finds a way to bring chosen sinners under the sound of the gospel. Blessed indeed are those men and women to whom God sends his messengers of grace (Jeremiah 3:15; Ephesians 4:8–16).

When God has purposed to save a sinner, he sends his Spirit into that sinner's heart and produces in him a real, heart conviction of sin (v. 37). "They were pricked in their heart." Holy Spirit conviction is a painful, but necessary work of grace. Without it no sinner can be saved (John 16:7–8). He strips that he may clothe, empties that he may fill, wounds that he may heal, and kills that he may make alive. Conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment is the work of God the Holy Spirit upon the heart, by which our pride and self-righteousness is made to wither (Isaiah 6:1–8). It arises from the revelation of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice (Zechariah 12:10). It acknowledges the justice of God in punishing sin. And true, Holy Spirit conviction always results in repentance and faith in Christ (John 6:44–45).

When God comes to a sinner in saving grace he commands the sinner to repent (v. 38). Peter, speaking by the Spirit, gave a command from God. They must obey or perish (Matthew 10:11–15, 40). Repentance is more than sorrow for sin. It is a change, a change of mind, a change of motives, a change of masters! It is a change of heart and a change of life that is continual.

The word "for" in verse 38 has caused much confusion. It would better be translated "because of". Baptism is not the cause of, or the means of sins' remission. Baptism is a symbolic confession of faith in the sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Being immersed in the watery grave, the believer professes his faith in the substitutionary work of Christ by which his sins have been purged away. Coming up out of the grave, he professes his allegiance to Christ, to walk in the newness of life (Romans 6:4–6). "The gift of the Holy Spirit" here promised to those who obey God's command in the gospel is everlasting salvation in Christ.

When God comes to sinners in saving grace, he calls them by the irresistible grace and power of his Spirit (v. 39). The promise of God is, "Whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13). It is given to "as many as the Lord our God shall call." Not all men are called. God sends the gospel to some and hides it from others (Matthew 11:20–26). There is a general call issued to all who hear the gospel, which all who hear are responsible to obey (Proverbs 1:25–33; Romans 10:18–21). But there is an effectual, irresistible call by God the Holy Spirit which is given to God's elect alone and graciously causes them to come to Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:4–5; Psalm 65:4). "He calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out" (John 10:3).

When God comes to sinners in saving power he causes them to obey his voice in the gospel (verses 40–41). These people whose hands were yet dripping with the blood of Christ, were now made willing in the day of his power to trust him and surrender to him as their Lord and Savior (Psalm 110:3). Grace made them willing!

Secondly, THE BUILDING OF THE CHURCH IS THE WORK OF GOD ALONE (verses 41–47). The church of God cannot be built by human ingenuity. It is built by the power of God alone through the preaching of the gospel of Christ. Every effort of men to build the church, other than the preaching of the gospel, is wood, hay, and stubble. God will never honor it (1 Corinthians 3:11–15). "THE LORD added to the church daily such as should be saved," and he still does!

In these last verses of chapter 2 Luke gives us an example of what every local church should be. It is a blessed fellowship of believers in Christ, a fellowship created and maintained by the Spirit of God (Ephesians 2:19–22). It is a DOCTRINAL FELLOWSHIP. "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine." All true Christian fellowship is built upon the doctrines of the gospel of Christ. It is a FRATERNAL FELLOWSHIP. Believers are men and women united in Christ. They truly have "all things common". Each uses what he has for the good of all. They are of "one accord", built up in love, with singleness of heart, seeking the glory of God. It is a SPIRITUAL FELLOWSHIP OF WORSHIP. When the local church is what it ought to be the people gladly receive the Word of God, obey the ordinances of Christ, and assemble together with one accord in the worship of God.

8. "SUCH AS I HAVE GIVE I YOU"

Acts 3:1–11

The healing of this lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple is a very instructive event. It is recorded here for our learning and our admonition.

1. Certainly, the events of this day show us the blessedness of public worship. At the appointed hour of prayer Peter and John came to the appointed place of public worship to worship God. Though the lame man came only for carnal reasons, still he came to the place where his needs were most likely to be met—The House of God. There God made himself known, both to his servants and to "a certain man lame from his mother's womb." Let every needy soul cherish the house of God, attend the assembly of worship, and give thanks to God for the privilege of doing so (Psalm 122:1; Hebrews 10:25). It is in the assembly of God's saints that needy sinners have hope of meeting the mighty Savior (Matthew 18:20).

2. This passage also shows us an example of Christian charity and kindness. Though Peter and John had no money in their pockets, they did not ignore this man's miserable plight and condition. And we ought always do what we can to relieve the sufferings of others (Matthew 6:3; 10:42; Luke 10:25–37).

3. Primarily, the purpose of this miracle is to demonstrate the power of the risen, exalted Christ to save sinners. This is the interpretation Peter himself gave of the miracle (Acts 4:10–12). The healing of this cripple beggar is a beautiful picture of God's effectual, saving grace in Christ. In these eleven verses the Spirit of God teaches us five important lessons.

First, ALL MEN ARE SPIRITUALLY IMPOTENT BY NATURE (v. 2). This man's impotence was not the result of an accident or a disease. It was a defect of birth. He was born in this helpless condition. This is our condition by nature, not physically, but spiritually. Our hearts are plagued with the incurable disease of sin. Spiritually, our legs are broken, our hands are withered, our eyes are blind, our ears are deaf. All men by nature are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1–4). So thorough is the natural man's spiritual impotence that he is altogether without ability to help himself. All the children of Adam are born totally depraved (Jeremiah 17:9; Matthew 15:19). Because his heart is evil, no man can or will come to Christ and be saved (John 5:40; 6:44). He has neither the desire nor the ability to do so (Jeremiah 13:23). God must do a work of grace in the heart before any sinner will ever come to Christ in faith. And if God does a work of grace in his heart, the sinner will come to Christ (John 6:45; Psalm 65:4; 110:3).

Because he was a cripple, he was unable to work for a living. He spent his days begging. That is our condition too! Before God we are poor, helpless beggars. We have no ability to earn anything from God, except death. We have no claim upon his mercy. All we can do is fall before him and beg for grace (Luke 18:13). As Matthew Henry said, "Those that need, and cannot work, must not be ashamed to beg!"

This beggar was a chosen object of divine mercy. He was both poor and helpless, but there were many others in that condition around the temple. Luke tells us that this man was "a certain man". God had chosen him and was determined to be gracious to him (

2 Thessalonians 2:13–14). Providence had made him poor and helpless and put him in the place where grace would be found.

Secondly, we are here given A STARK REMINDER THAT RELIGION WITHOUT CHRIST IS A MOCKERY TO THE SOULS OF MEN. There stood the temple with its breath taking splendor. Josephus tells us that it was made of solid white, polished marble. This Beautiful Gate was made of fine Corinthian gold. With the mid-day sun shining upon it, it was almost blinding with brilliance. The Jews were very proud of their temple, but it was an empty, desolate place. God had left it! The glory of God had departed. There was nothing and no one connected with that temple that could be of any real benefit to that poor, helpless beggar. Its' splendor, riches, and beauty only mocked him! What a sad picture of modern religion! There is in religion much to impress the flesh: wealth, influence, talent, entertainment, and rituals and ceremonies to soothe the conscience, a form of godliness, but no power! No gospel! No grace! No Christ! No life! It is a mockery to God and to the souls of men!

Thirdly, WHEN GOD INTENDS TO SAVE A SINNER HE ALWAYS USES CERTAIN MEANS (verses 1–5). Were he pleased to do so, the sovereign, almighty God could perform his works of mercy without the use of means. But that is not his pleasure. God condescends to honor us by allowing us to be instruments in his hands by which he performs his works of mercy toward his chosen. He who raised dead Lazarus could easily have removed the stone from the tomb; but he allowed and commanded men to do what they could do, saying, "Take you away the stone" (John 11:39). Even so, this poor, lame beggar was healed by the power of God alone. Peter makes that abundantly clear (verses 12–16). But three things had to be done by men before he could be healed.

1. Peter and John came to the temple to preach the gospel of Christ (Romans 1:16–17; 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23).

2. This man's friends brought him to the temple, the place where he was most hopeful of finding mercy (Luke 5:18–20).

3. This man did what God's servants told him to do (verses 4–6). We know that God's purpose will never fail. This man had to be healed on this occasion. God had purposed it. Yet, if Peter and John had not obeyed their Lord and gone to preach the gospel, if this man's friends had not brought him to the temple, or if the man himself had refused to obey the voice of God's servants, he would never have been healed.

Fourthly, the healing of this lame man shows us that THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IS AN ALMIGHTY, ALL-SUFFICIENT SAVIOR (verses 6–8). This is a picture of true conversion. "You have seen how this man's body has been healed, even by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; and it is in this way that your soul must be saved, for there is no other power that can effect such a change within you, a change from weakness to strength, from death to life"—(Charles Simeon). Christ is able to save! By the mere exercise of his sovereign will sin is subdued, guilt is removed, the dead live, bloodthirsty lions are made to be lambs, and wretched sinners are made new creatures in him. Christ on the tree has put away sin (Hebrews 9:26). Christ on the throne is able to save (Hebrews 7:25).

Fifthly, THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST IS ALWAYS EFFECTUAL (verses 8–11). It always accomplishes its intended purpose (Isaiah 55:10–11). It offers salvation and eternal life to all who come to Christ (Isaiah 45:22). It is the means by which God the Holy Spirit brings chosen sinners to Christ (Psalm 65:4). And it gives praise, honor, and glory to God for his saving goodness (1 Corinthians 1:26–31).

9. A LESSON IN PREACHING THE GOSPEL

Acts 3:11–26

Preachers and churches would be wise to carefully study the preaching and the sermons of God's servants which are recorded for us in the Word of God, especially those found in the book of Acts. If we would be of any spiritual, eternal benefit to the souls of men, serve the interests of Christ's kingdom, and honor God, there must be a return to the apostolic preaching of the cross.

Peter and John went to the temple at the hour of prayer to preach the gospel of Christ as the Lord had commanded them. As they were going into the temple, they met a poor, cripple beggar who was healed by Christ. This man, as soon as he was healed, went into the temple leaping and praising God. Of course, this miracle caused a great commotion and aroused the interest of many. In the passage now before us Peter met this crowd of people at the point of their curiosity and preached the gospel to them. This was his second sermon after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. There is no substantial difference between this message and the one preached on that day. Like the other apostles and like Paul, who was yet to be converted, Peter constantly preached Christ to men (1 Corinthians 2:1–2). In this sermon at the temple Peter shows us how the gospel is to be preached.

PETER'S FIRST CONCERN WAS TO GET THE ATTENTION OF HIS HEARERS FOCUSED ON CHRIST (verses 11–12). These people were excited and curious about the healing of the lame man. They were amazed at the mighty work performed (they thought) by Peter and John. Therefore, Peter's first concern was to turn their attention away from the man healed, away from John, and away from himself. The matter of first concern was to get people to think not about the healed man, or the act of healing, but about Christ the Healer! They were in Solomon's porch, and filled with wonder. Seizing the opportunity, Peter stepped forward and said, "Behold, a greater than Solomon has done this!" He met these people where they were, at their point of interest, but immediately endeavored to turn their attention to Christ.

There was no reason for amazement. "Why marvel you at this?" True, a lame man had been healed, but just a few days prior to this the Lord Jesus had healed a dead man! (Read John 11:43–45). Christ had repeatedly displayed his power over life and death as God. We should never be surprised to see him display that power. We ought to expect it!

Peter would allow no honor, credit, praise, or applause to be given to himself and John. They were only instruments in the hands of Christ. True, those who are the instruments of God's favor to us should be loved, honored, respected, and highly esteemed by us for their work's sake (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13). But God's servants must not be idolized. True gospel preachers carefully shun recognition, desiring that Christ only be exalted and honored (1 Corinthians 3:5–7; 4:1; 2 Corinthians 4:5, 7).

ONCE HE GOT THEIR ATTENTION FOCUSED ON CHRIST, PETER PREACHED CHRIST TO THIS MULTITUDE (verses 13–16). This is the one thing preachers today have in common with the apostles. None today have apostolic gifts of inspiration, miracles, or tongues. But every gospel preacher is called and gifted of God to preach Christ (1 Corinthians 1:17–23; 2 Corinthians 4:5). In preaching Christ to this crowd of men who were guilty of murdering the Lord of glory Peter did four things.

First, HE TOLD THEM WHO CHRIST IS (v. 13). He is the true and living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the promised Messiah, the Son of David, the King of Israel. Essentially, Peter said, "This Jesus, whom you crucified, is God over all, blessed forever. He is the God-man, the only Lord and Savior. That One whom you crucified, God has glorified!" (See Isaiah 55:5; John 17:2; Romans 14:9; Philippians 2:9–11).

Second, PETER EXPOSED THEIR SIN (verses 13–15). Looking them squarely in the eye, planting his feet firmly, with great boldness, the Apostle flatly and plainly charged these men with murdering the Son of God! That is what preachers are supposed to do. Faithful gospel preachers probe, and probe, and probe until they find your point of rebellion. They expose the enmity of your heart to God. They know that they must. Until sinners are made to see and confess their sin, they will not trust Christ and be reconciled to God.

Third, GOD'S SERVANT DECLARED WHAT CHRIST HAS DONE (v. 15). Though he died the painful, shameful, ignominious death of the cross, Jesus Christ was raised from the dead by the power of God. That resurrection removed all reproach from him, ratified his claims (Romans 1:1–4), confirmed his doctrine, and is the basis of all faith and hope in him (Romans 4:25–5:1; 8:33–34).

Fourth, THE APOSTLE PROCLAIMED THE POWER OF THE RISEN CHRIST (v. 16). This miracle was performed in the name of Christ, by virtue of his power. It was a miracle done by "the faith which is by him," by the faith which he gave. Every miracle of grace is performed by the name of Christ (Acts 4:12), through faith in him, a faith that he gives (Ephesians 1:19; 2:8; Colossians 2:12).

THEN PETER GAVE A REASON FOR HOPE (verses 17–18). Once he had wounded them, he hoped to see them healed. They were guilty; but there is hope for the guilty because Christ died to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Though they had indeed crucified the Lord of glory, the death of Christ was according to the wise and gracious purpose of God (Isaiah 53:10–11; Acts 2:23). When Joseph's brothers realized who he was and what power he had, they remembered their sin and feared. But Joseph said, "Fear not, for I am in the place of God." Even so, the Lord Jesus Christ, our Joseph, says to guilty sinners, "Fear not, for I am in the place of God to save much people alive" (Genesis 50:19–20). The Lord Jesus Christ died, arose, and ascended to glory to save sinners according to the will of God (Acts 5:30–31).

PETER PRESSED UPON HIS HEARERS THE CLAIMS OF THE SOVEREIGN CHRIST (verses 19–26). He urged them to repent, holding before them the promise of grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation now and forever (verses 19–21). He urged them to repentance by showing them the certain destruction of all who refuse to obey Christ (verses 22–23). At last, Peter urged these men to repent by pointing out the fulfillment of all God's covenant blessings in Christ (verses 24–26).

10. "THE PRINCE OF LIFE"

Acts 3:14–15

In this passage Peter is preaching to the Jews and their religious leaders in the temple. He who once quivered before a maid now speaks with boldness. He gloried in the cross of Christ and plainly exposed the hideous sin of the people to whom he preached, saying, you "killed the Prince of life!" Here the Apostle gives an example to all who preach the gospel. The subject of our preaching must always be the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; and in preaching the cross we must expose the enmity of man's heart toward God, calling the wicked to repentance and faith.

THIS TEXT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE IS FULL OF GOSPEL DOCTRINE. "You denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; and killed the Prince of life, whom God has raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses."

THE DEPRAVITY OF MAN—The astonishing hideousness of human sin is glaringly evident in the murder of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jeremiah tells us, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked." Paul declares, "The carnal mind is enmity against God." But the infamous measure of human sin is discovered only in the crucifixion of God's dear Son by the hands of men, men who were but representatives of all men. The cold-blooded murder of Jesus Christ is a glaring proof of man's hatred of God! That is the essence of the doctrine of total depravity.

THE HOLINESS AND JUSTICE OF GOD—When God made his own Son to be sin for us, he forsook the darling of Heaven, poured out the vials of his unmitigated wrath upon him, punished him to the full satisfaction of his infinite justice, and killed him! The death of Christ upon the cross declares that our God is a just God and a Savior (Isaiah 45:20), both just and the Justifier of all who trust him (Romans 3:24–26).

THE CONDESCENSION OF CHRIST—Wonder of wonders! He who is the Prince of life stooped to die! He who is Lord of all humbled himself to die by the hands of wicked men. He who gives and sustains all life was killed by men who live upon his goodness. The nails in his hands and feet could never have held the Son of God to the cursed tree. It was his zeal for the glory of God and his love for his people that held him there (Philippians 2:5–11; 2 Corinthians 8:9). Because he saved others, he would not and could not save himself.

THE FOLLY OF REBELLION—All rebellion against the Lord Jesus Christ is madness (Psalm 2:1–12). It is true, these men killed the Prince of life. They rebelled against his claims. They would not have him to reign over them. So they killed him. But he is the Prince of life! Now, that very Christ man has crucified is risen, exalted, and given power over all flesh. One day, either in repentance or in judgment, every sinner will bow to and acknowledge him as Lord (Isaiah 45:22–25).

THE GLORIOUS TRIUMPH OF CHRIST—He is "the Prince of life, whom God has raised from the dead!" His own Godhead raised him. God the Father raised him. God the Spirit raised him. He resumed his life triumphantly. By his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ was declared to be the Son of God with power (Romans 1:1–4). His resurrection declares that Satan is vanquished (John 12:31; Rev. 20:1–3), the sins of God's elect have been put away (Colossians 2:12–15), his people are justified (Romans 4:25), God's justice is satisfied (Isaiah 53:10–12), and all his redeemed shall also be raised from the dead (John 11:25; 1 Corinthians 15:23).

THE CREDIBILITY OF THE GOSPEL—The credibility of the gospel is the fact that it is the revelation of God. Yet, so gracious is the Almighty that he gives men undeniable proof that the gospel of Christ, (the message of his death, burial, and resurrection as the sinners' Substitute), is true. Peter says, with regard to these things, "Whereof we are witnesses."

There stood Peter and John, two evidently honest men. They had nothing to gain by their testimony, and much to lose. They might have called upon the other nine apostles. They might even have called upon more than 500 brethren who had seen the risen Lord at one time to confirm their testimony (1 Corinthians 15:4–7). The witness of such men is unquestionably true. Jesus Christ the Lord overcame the powers of death. His body arose from the tomb three days after he died. His victorious resurrection is a matter of fact, as certain and credible as any fact recorded upon the pages of human history. Jesus Christ of Nazareth, though he died upon the cross, lives today as the Prince of life!

"THE PRINCE OF LIFE" IS A TITLE THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IS WELL QUALIFIED TO WEAR. This is one of those famous titles by which the Son of God reveals himself to men. He will be gloriously known by this name in the day of his appearing, when he shall raise the dead. But it is a title which rightfully belonged to him before he was crucified, for his murderers "killed the Prince of life." This title belonged to him even when he was in the tomb. Though his body was dead, Christ was still the Prince of life. Now that he is risen from the dead and ever lives to make intercession for us, the Lord Jesus fully possesses all that is implied in this title. He shares it with no one; and no one can take it away from him. The Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, is the Prince of life. What does this title imply?

He is the Author of life. All life proceeds from Jesus Christ, God our Creator, by whom all things consist. This is especially true of spiritual, eternal life. The gift of life is entirely the prerogative of the Prince of life (John 5:21; 17:2; 1 John 5:11–12).

Christ possesses life supremely. Life is in him emphatically and superlatively. He is the life (John 14:6; 1 John 1:2). Apart from him there is no life. Christ is life self-existent, life essential, and life eternal. Life dwells in him in all its fullness, force, perfection, and independence (John 5:26). Everything else is passing away, but Jesus Christ lives and gives eternal life to all who trust him.

He won for his people the right to live. Christ has "abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." He delivered us from death (spiritual and eternal) by his obedience to God as our Substitute and the power of his grace. He delivered us from the fear of death (physical) by granting us faith in him (Hebrews 4:14–15).

Jesus Christ freely gives life to dead sinners (Psalm 68:18–20). While in this world, whenever our Savior came into contact with death it fled from his presence. He always triumphed over it (Mark 5:35–42; Luke 7:11–15; John 11:43–44). The same is true today. Wherever the Prince of life comes in saving power, spiritual death flees (John 5:25). So it shall be when he comes again (John 5:28–29).

Christ marvelously sustains life. By the power of his grace (John 10:28–29), by keeping us in union with himself (John 15:5), and by feeding our souls upon the Bread of life (John 6:47, 48, 51, 53–56), our Savior keeps us in life!

The Prince of life is the Ruler of life. Where Christ lives, he reigns! All true, spiritual life gladly yields obedience to him (Luke 14:33). He wears no empty titles. All to whom he gives life willingly bow to him as "THE PRINCE OF LIFE."

11. THE NAME THAT IS ABOVE ALL NAMES

Acts 4:1–12

The religious leaders at Jerusalem seem to have been stunned and confounded by the great out-pouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and by the conversion of so many to Christ. But they quickly rallied their forces against the apostles, as they had against Christ, and attempted to silence the gospel. Their efforts were futile. As always, the powers of darkness were confounded by the Prince of Light. Study this record of the first persecution of God's servants and be assured that the cause of Christ cannot fail. The God and King whose cause we serve rules this world in absolute sovereignty. He must prevail! It is written, "He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet."

PETER AND JOHN WERE ARRESTED FOR PREACHING THE GOSPEL (verses 1–4). The powers of darkness were against them. They had invaded the very domain of Satan. They were in the temple at Jerusalem preaching the gospel of Christ! They could not do otherwise. This is what the Lord had sent them to do. After healing the lame man, while they had the attention of the crowd, they preached Christ to them.

WITH GREAT BOLDNESS THESE TWO MEN BARE FAITHFUL WITNESS TO CHRIST IN THE MIDST OF HIS ENEMIES (verses 1–2). The principle point of their doctrine on this occasion was the resurrection of the dead. "They preached THROUGH JESUS the resurrection of the dead." Peter and John knew their business. They did not meddle in the affairs of the state. They did not seek, or become involved with social reform. They did not even attempt to shut down the dens of vice in Jerusalem. These men were preachers. So they preached. They pointed sinners to Christ and proclaimed him as the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25). Declaring only what they had seen and heard, they preached the fact of Christ's resurrection from the dead. To preach the resurrection by Christ is to preach these five things:

1. The Death of Christ as the Substitute for Sinners (2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13; Acts 3:13–15).

2. The Resurrection of Christ as the Representative of God's Elect (Hebrews 6:20; Ephesians 2:5–6; Acts 3:13).

3. The Exaltation of Christ as Lord over all (John 17:2; Romans 14:9; Acts 2:32–36).

4. The Second Coming of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; Acts 3:19–21).

5. Salvation and Eternal Life to All Who Trust Christ (John 11:25; Romans 10:9–13; Acts 3:19, 26).

The gospel which Peter and John preached was made effectual to many by the Holy Spirit (v. 4). Though the preachers were persecuted, the Word of God grew and prevailed. A few days earlier three thousand souls had been converted by the grace of God (Acts 2:31). Now faith had been granted to five thousand more. Two sermons were preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, and the church grew from one hundred and twenty to more than eight thousand believers in Jerusalem!

Yet, to the religious leaders of the city the gospel of Christ was an offense (verses 2–3). The doctrines of Christ's substitutionary atonement, resurrection glory, and free salvation were offensive to the pride, religious works, and self-righteousness of these men. They were grieved by that which should have made them rejoice. They were grieved by the glory of Christ! Not only were they offended by the message of salvation by grace through the merits of the crucified Substitute, they were also fearful of losing their hold on the people. So they arrested Peter and John. For the present, these faithful servants of God only had to suffer imprisonment. Later, they would be put to death for preaching the gospel. The Lord wisely trains his people for suffering by degrees. He sends lesser trials to prepare them for the greater. From the very beginning, the history of God's church has been a history of suffering at the hands of persecutors. It is a history written in blood. The cause of the persecution is the preaching of the gospel of the free grace of God flowing to sinners through the merits of Christ's precious blood. This message is an offense to self-righteous, religious people (Galatians 5:11).

THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF THE NATION TRIED TO INTIMIDATE PETER AND JOHN INTO SILENCE (verses 5–7). These "rulers, and elders, and scribes" were the men of greatest respect, power, and influence in the nation of Israel, the Sanhedrin. They asked Peter and John, "By what power, or by what means have you done this?" Had they replied, "Jehovah, the only true and living God, did this," their answer would have been true; but it would have been a denial of Christ! The Sanhedrin would have said, "Bless his name," and the affair would have ended. But Peter knew that the object of their hatred was not God as they conceived him to be, but God in the flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ. He had faced those men before and wilted (Luke 23:54–56). He would never deny his Lord again! Picture Peter standing in the midst of this ecclesiastical court. He braced himself, planted his feet firmly, not knowing what they might do to him, but being fully aware of his own responsibility, he spoke as a faithful servant of God.

BOLDLY, WITH DEFIANT CONVICTION, PETER PREACHED CHRIST TO HIS PERSECUTORS, WITHOUT COMPROMISE (verses 8–10). He was filled with the Holy Spirit, who taught him what to say and gave him the courage to say it (Luke 12:11–12). He was altogether innocent of any evil in the matter at hand. He had done exactly what the Lord had commanded him to do. Yet, he knew he was in the place where God had put him. So he seized the opportunity and boldly confessed Christ in the very teeth of his enemies. (Read his confession in verses 10–12). In this confession Peter places great emphasis upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, as do all the Scriptures (Isaiah 9:6–7; Matthew 1:21). "God has highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name!"

His name is PRECIOUS (Song of Sol. 1:3; 1 Peter 2:7). POWER is associated with his name (Philippians 2:9–11). His name is the source and cause of the believer's PARDON (1 John 2:12). We are saved by faith in his name (John 1:12–13; Romans 10:13). All that God does for sinners in grace he does for Christ's sake (Ephesians 4:32). All true PRAYER is offered to God in the name of Christ, our Representative and Substitute. To call upon his name is to trust him as our Savior. We come to God only in his name (John 14:13–14). The believer has PEACE through the name of Christ (John 14:27; 16:33). The name of the Lord is our PROTECTION at all times (Proverbs 18:10; 2 Samuel 22:1–4). The PRESERVATION of God's elect, our eternal security, is in his name (John 17:11). What would become of his name, if one of his believing ones was lost? His name is the theme of all true PREACHING (Luke 24:47). In the Word of God, the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is always associated with PROSPERITY (Jeremiah 23:5; Rev. 19:11–16). "The pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand." "He shall not fail!" The Lion of the tribe of Judah shall prevail. The Lamb of God shall be satisfied. His people shall be saved. His cause shall be triumphant. His enemies shall bow before his feet. His name shall be glorified (Rev. 5:9–14).

12. WHAT DOES MY LIFE SAY ABOUT CHRIST?

Acts 4:13–22

Several things in this paragraph need to be carefully observed. Each is a matter worthy of more detailed study than can be given here.

First, Neither the gospel that Peter and John preached, nor the miracle they performed could be denied. The evidence was undeniable (verses 13–16). These men had honored God. They faithfully confessed Christ, bearing witness to him before his enemies, and God honored their faithfulness. Though they were now prisoners before the Sanhedrin, the Lord was with them. As he had promised, the Holy Spirit gave them the wisdom and the words they needed (Matthew 10:19). GOD ALWAYS HONORS THOSE WHO HONOR HIM (1 Samuel 2:30).

Second, When there is a conflict between the will of God and the laws of men, the believer must obey God, regardless of cost (verses 17–20). In all things regarding civil life and government, believers are to be subject to the power and authority of civil rulers (Romans 13:1–4). However, if we are required by law to do that which is in direct violation of the Word of God, we are bound to obey God.

Third, All who serve the cause of God in this world will be protected by God and the cause they serve will succeed (verses 21–22). God will be glorified! In his wise and adorable providence God makes all things work together for the spiritual, eternal good of his elect and the glory of his own great name (Psalm 76:10; Romans 8:28; Rev. 4:11). He always does that which is best. At this time, it was best for Peter and John to be released. Later, it was best for them to be beaten and imprisoned. Still later, it was best for them to be brutally killed for the testimony of Christ.

However, the thing that seems most significant in this paragraph is recorded in verse 13—"Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marveled; and THEY TOOK KNOWLEDGE OF THEM, THAT THEY HAD BEEN WITH JESUS." Those men who had no reverence for God, no regard for Christ, and no interest in the gospel, took notice of Peter and John as being men whose lives were manifestly under the influence and control of the Lord Jesus Christ. Their communion and conversation with Christ so influenced their lives, their speech, and their conduct that even their enemies acknowledged them to be followers of Christ.

Here is a question that ought to pierce every believer's heart—What does my life say about Christ? What does my behavior say to the people around whom I work and live about the Christ I profess to trust, love, and serve? This much is certain—If a person truly knows Christ, if a person lives in communion with Jesus Christ by faith, Christ will be manifest in his life. Paul knew the Thessalonians were elect of God because Christ was manifest in them (1 Thessalonians 1:3–10). Give thoughtful consideration to the following questions:

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN? A Christian is a person who has been chosen by God in eternal election as an object of his love and grace (Ephesians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13), a person who has been redeemed from the curse of the law by the blood of Christ which was shed for the satisfaction of divine justice for God's elect (Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 3:18), one who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel (1 Peter 1:23; James 1:8), a person who by the irresistible influence of God the Holy Spirit freely acknowledges his sin and believes on the Lord Jesus Christ, confessing him as Lord (Romans 10:9–13; 1 John 1:9). A Christian is a person in whom Christ dwells (Colossians 1:27; 2 Peter 1:4).

The new birth is nothing less than Christ coming into a sinner's heart, taking possession of him, ruling him, and causing him to become a follower of himself (Matthew 12:29; Luke 14:26–27). Anything less than this is not Christianity. A Christian, a true believer, is a man or a woman who desires and seeks the perfection of Christ's character in himself (Philippians 3:10; Colossians 3:1–3; Hebrews 12:14). Perfect conformity to Christ cannot be attained in this life, but that fact does not hinder the pursuit of it. The believer longs to be like Christ, to walk in his steps, to follow his example (John 13:15). Here are four things that characterized our Savior's life. These four things will, to one degree or another, characterize all who know and follow him:

1. Unflinching boldness for the honor of God (Matthew 21:12–13).

2. Gentleness and love (John 8:1–12; 1 Corinthians 13:1–8; Ephesians 4:32–5:1).

3. Self-abasing humility (Philippians 2:5–8).

4. Righteousness (Luke 2:49–52; Ephesians 4:17–32).

Find a person whose life truly exemplifies these characteristics and you have found a person who has evidently "been with Jesus". Those who bear the fruit of the Spirit are born of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). Good works have nothing to do with salvation. We are saved by grace alone. But grace always produces good works (Ephesians 2:8–10).

WHEN SHOULD BELIEVERS STRIVE TO BE LIKE CHRIST? I hope this question appears to be redundant to you. Yet, there are many who seem to think that Christianity is for Sundays and for church, but should not greatly interfere with a person's life. If your religion does not interfere with your life, your religion is a sham (2 Corinthians 5:17). That person who knows Christ strives to be like him at all times, in all places, in all circumstances.

—In The House of God (1 Timothy 3:15–16).

—In The Daily Affairs Of Life (Matthew 15:14–16).

—In The Home (Ephesians 5:22–6:4).

—In Heart and Attitude (Psalm 139:23–24).

WHY SHOULD THOSE WHO LOVE CHRIST STRIVE TO BE LIKE HIM? The believer's life is not motivated by law, but by grace. God's people do not serve him for fear of punishment or in hope of reward. And they certainly do not do what they do to be seen of men (

Matthew 6:1–18), but they do seek to imitate Christ in all things.

Earnestly strive to be like Christ in all things FOR YOUR OWN SAKE. Your happiness in this world greatly depends upon your obedience to Christ. Your spiritual health, in great measure, depends upon your willingness to follow your Savior. Imitate Christ in all things FOR THE GOSPEL'S SAKE (Titus 2:10). The gospel you profess to believe will gain or lose credibility in the eyes of men by the way you live. Strive to conform your life to Christ FOR CHRIST'S SAKE. Loving gratitude demands it (2 Corinthians 5:14). Child of God, never forget who you are and whose you are (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23).

HOW CAN A PERSON BE LIKE CHRIST? Many who admire the love and purity of Christ's life try to follow his example. But they are building without a foundation. The house they build will soon crumble around them. It will do you no good to mold your behavior to the example of Christ until your heart is renewed by grace. "You must be born again!" Only Christ can make men and women to be like Christ. He does this by four mighty works of grace.

1. Blood Atonement (1 Peter 3:18).

2. Imputed Righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21).

3. Regenerating, Sanctifying Grace (2 Peter 1:4).

4. Resurrection Glory (Philippians 3:21).

13. THE CHURCH IN PRAYER

Acts 4:23–31

After their arrest and trial for preaching the gospel of Christ, Peter and John were released, but were given strict command by the Jewish sanhedrin "not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus" (v. 18). As soon as they were released Peter and John went to the place where God's saints were gathered for worship and told their brethren what had happened to them. Then the saints "lifted up their voice to God with one accord." They had a prayer meeting. What a weapon! Nothing strengthens the hands of God's church and his servants in the work of the gospel like prayer. I call your attention to three things in this passage.

THE COMFORT AND JOY OF A REAL CHURCH FAMILY—(v. 23). When Peter and John were released from bondage, they did not go home. They did not go to the courts to file a lawsuit. They did not do any of the things that many today do in the name of God when they feel that they have been wronged. (Read 2 Corinthians 10:3–4). Peter and John went to their family, the church of God, and told them what had happened. The Holy Spirit describes it in simple, tender terms. "They went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them."

The saints of God were meeting together at the appointed place in the hour of worship. Peter and John went directly to the meeting place because that is where they wanted and needed to be. There is no joy that can compare to the fellowship of God's saints in the house of worship. There is no comfort like the comfort of believing men and women as they sit together in fellowship in the house of God, singing his praise, calling upon him in prayer, and hearing the gospel of Christ preached in the power of the Spirit, worshiping the Triune God. When David was driven from his throne and forced to live in the wilderness for fear of his life, above all else, he longed to once more go with his brethren into the house of God to worship the Lord (Psalm 84:1–4, 10). The man after God's own heart said, "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord" (Psalm 122:1).

Nothing is more important and beneficial in the life of a believer than the assembly of God's saints in public worship. Every true local church is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16). Christ has promised to meet with every assembly of men and women gathered in his name (Matthew 18:20). You are most likely to hear from God in that place where men and women gather to hear the gospel preached (Romans 10:17; Ephesians 4:11–16). In the house of God the people of God gather to worship at the throne of God. In our songs of praise, in our observance of the ordinances, in our prayers, and in our preaching, our object is the worship of God. The assembly of the saints is the meeting of God's family. What can be more delightful and beneficial than a family gathering? When I am sick, in trouble, sorrowful, depressed, or rejoicing, I want to be with my family (Psalm 133:1).

Paul gives us wise counsel when he admonishes us not to despise and neglect the assembly of God's saints. That is the first step to total apostasy (Hebrews 10:24–26). We need those things God has provided for his children in his house more than we need anything else in this world: The ministry of the Word, the fellowship of God's saints, the communion of Christ, and the worship of God. After spending two days and nights among the Lord's enemies, Peter and John wanted, above anything else, to spend a little time in the house of God with the family of God.

THE MATTERS OF GREAT CONCERN IN PRAYER—(verses 24–30). After the Apostles told the church what had happened to them, with one accord they began to pray. They did not take up arms. They did not try to rally the nation behind the cause of religious freedom. They did not try to form a ministerial association so that the Jewish leaders and the apostles of Christ might learn to work together. They did not turn on Peter and John and ask them to resign because they could not fit into the community. And they did not take a vote to form a committee to investigate the social impact of Christianity upon the Jewish world. THEY PRAYED!

Obviously, one man led the congregation in prayer. Perhaps several led them at successive times. But they did not all audibly pray at once. In the house of God all things are "done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40). No aspect of public worship is more important than public prayer. When a man leads the congregation in prayer, as he lifts his voice to God, the whole congregation ought to lift their hearts with his, ascribing praise to God, acknowledging his good providence and the blessings of his grace, seeking the power of his Spirit to attend the ministry of the Word for the glory of Christ. This is exactly what happened in verses 24–30.

They adored the supremacy and greatness of the Lord God (v. 24). Nothing encourages people to do God's work or to suffer for his name's sake like the realization of his greatness. Our God is great! We may reasonably expect great things from him. He who made all things and rules all things has all things at his disposal (Psalm 135:6). Get hold of that and you will get hold of both courage and peace.

The saints of God here acknowledged and bowed to the sovereign purpose of God revealed in the accomplishment of his providence (verses 24–28). These men and women confidently believed that both they and their enemies were completely, totally, absolutely in the hands of God. That fact secured their hearts in peace. They believed his Word (verses 25–26), submitted to his providence (v. 27), and acknowledged his purpose (v. 28). Nothing thwarts the purpose of God. Nothing escapes his absolute rule (Isaiah 14:24, 26, 27; Daniel 4:34–35). The purpose of God is the salvation of his people by the death of his Son. He sovereignly controls even the rage of ungodly, reprobate men to accomplish that great purpose!

Then these saints of God asked the Lord to grant to his servants grace and strength to preach the Word (verses 29–30). They made three simple, submissive requests of faith to God, whose cause they served, whose glory they sought.

1. They asked God to watch over them—"Now, Lord, behold their threatenings." (See Zechariah 2:8).

2. They asked him to grant his servants boldness to preach the gospel.

3. They asked him to stretch forth his hand, to reveal his power, his grace, and his glory in their midst (v. 30).

They asked these things in the name of Christ and for the glory of Christ.

THE LORD'S GRACIOUS ANSWER TO THE CRY OF HIS PEOPLE (v. 31). In response to their prayer, God made himself known in the midst of his people. The church was filled with the Spirit. The Apostles preached the Word of God with boldness. God was honored. Let every congregation imitate this congregation and God will be honored in his church today!

14. GRACE, GENEROSITY, AND GREED

Acts 4:32–5:11

In the Book of Acts the Holy Spirit gives us a detailed picture of the early church. Like the church today, it was a mixed multitude. Tares grew with the wheat. Goats were mingled with the Lord's sheep. Among the people of God there were, even in those early days, covetous, idolatrous hypocrites. Every Sunday school child has heard about Ananias and his wife, Sapphira. Their story begins in chapter four, at verse thirty-two and continues through chapter five, verse eleven. In this story the Spirit of God gives us a striking contrast between true faith in Christ and a mere hypocritical profession of faith. True faith surrenders all to Christ. Religious hypocrisy merely pretends to surrender all to Christ. If you will carefully read these few verses of Inspiration, three things will catch your attention.

AN ATTITUDE OF GRACE—The first thing the Holy Spirit directs our attention to in this passage is an attitude of grace among the people of God (4:32–35). Believing hearts are gracious hearts. True faith really converts sinners. The person who is born again by the Spirit of God is no longer a selfish, self-centered, self-seeking, self-serving person, but a grateful, thoughtful, generous, serving person. All who live unto God die unto the world. The person who finds his life in Christ loses his life to Christ (Matthew 10:39). These early disciples show by their example that faith lives not for material gain, but for spiritual good. Faith seeks not temporal riches. Faith loves not the things of this world, which are passing away, but the things of that world which is to come, which are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18). Faith seeks the kingdom of God and his righteousness, not the mammon of unrighteousness (Matthew 6:24, 31–33). Faith in Christ produces an attitude of grace in the heart. Those who have experienced the grace of God are gracious. Is this not the teaching of these four verses?

Faith unites the people of God. Luke tells us that "the multitude of them that believed were of one accord" (v. 32). All of God's people truly are one in Christ. We are one family (Ephesians 3:14–15), a family of sinners saved by grace. Our hearts love one Person supremely, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:8; 1 John 4:19). We are devoted to one cause, the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:10). We seek one thing above all other things, the will of God (Matthew 6:6). We have one dominating, ultimate goal, the glory of God (John 12:28). These things are true of all believers! Many other things, regrettably, may divide us while we live in this body of flesh and sin. But here we are one. Let every child of God endeavor, therefore, to keep "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1–6).

Faith in Christ makes men and women generous with their possessions—"Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common" (v. 32). These men and women were so taken up with the cause of Christ and with their love for one another that they placed no value upon personal property, personal wealth, or personal advantages. These believers were truly indifferent to such things. They did not even look upon their own possessions as their own. In their hearts' affection they had forsaken all to follow Christ. They recognized that all earthly, material things are only temporary. They were so thoroughly united to one another in love that they each looked upon their own property as the common property of God's people.

These men and women had learned what every child of God in this world must learn—All that we have in this world belongs to God. God has entrusted each of us with certain of this world's goods to use as stewards in his house. We are responsible to use them wisely for the advancement of his kingdom, the furtherance of his gospel, the comfort of his people, and the glory of his name. These men and women were willing to rob themselves of comfort, convenience, and personal satisfaction for one another's good. Is it any wonder that the Apostles preached with such power, "when such great grace was upon them all" (v. 33)?

True faith actually causes God's saints to prefer each other above themselves. This is manifest in verses 34 and 35. These men and women sold their possessions, their houses and their lands rather than allow their brothers and sisters in Christ to be in need of the necessities of life! The grace of God still produces this kind of graciousness, mercifulness, and love (Philippians 2:1–8; James 2:14–17; 1 John 3:16–18).

Their gifts were free, voluntary sacrifices of love. No one told them to give. No one told them how to give. No one told them how much to give. In the church of God giving is not regulated by law, but by love (2 Corinthians 9:7). The only constraint these people felt was the constraint of love (2 Corinthians 5:14). They saw what the needs of the church were and willingly met those needs, without the least pressure to do so. Notice also that the people of God trusted the servants of God to distribute their gifts under the direction of the Spirit of God (v. 35). Where the Spirit of God rules the hearts of men there is trust and trustworthiness! The Apostles of Christ were not (and his servants are not) greedy men. They took only what they needed to sustain themselves. Everything else was distributed as needs demanded.

AN ACT OF GENEROSITY—The Spirit of God inspired Luke to tell us about one man specifically, who was an example of the rest. Barnabas performed a great deed, an act of generosity (4:36–37). As one that was ordained of God to be a preacher of the gospel, Barnabas disentangled himself from the affairs of this world (2 Timothy 2:4; 1 Corinthians 9:6–14). Perhaps Barnabas did not know it at this time, but God was preparing him for the work of preaching the gospel. Indeed, all who are called of God to preach the gospel are prepared, equipped, and qualified by him to do so (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:6–9). Barnabas was just the kind of man God uses in the work of the ministry. God had made him such a man by his Spirit and by his grace. He was a peaceful man, one who comforted and encouraged the saints. He was a generous man, an example of Christian charity. He was willingly submissive to the Apostles, the servants of Christ (Hebrews 13:7, 17). Barnabas was a man of good report, who in the providence of God gained the love and respect of God's people. Then, after God prepared him for it, he was made a preacher of the gospel (Acts 13:2).

AN ACT OF GREED—There was a wicked, hypocritical couple in the church, Ananias and Sapphira. When Ananias saw how greatly Barnabas was admired by God's people, he was filled with envy. So he and his wife agreed to lie to God. (Hypocrisy is lying to God!). They made a great gift to the church, but their gift was an act of greed. They gave because they wanted recognition. At first glance they appear to have done a great thing. They sold a piece of property to help the church. They gave a handsome amount of money, perhaps much more than Barnabas had given. But God looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). The gift Ananias and Sapphira brought revealed a graceless, greedy heart. They pretended to give all, when in fact they had given nothing. No one asked them to give anything. Theirs was an unwilling sacrifice, given only in a hypocritical pretense, a sham, a show, a mockery. Their gift was an act of covetousness and greed, not of grace and love. They hoped to gain by giving, to gain the applause of men! Their gift was an abomination to God (Luke 16:15). Beware of covetousness and hypocrisy!

15. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A CHURCH MEMBER FALLS?

Acts 5:3, 12–16

Everything was going well for the church at Jerusalem. The gospel was being preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. The saints of God were united in heart, committed to Christ, committed to the gospel, and committed to one another. God was doing great things among his people. The little band of believers had grown from 120 to well over 8000 in number. The church of God, which had been a joke in the minds of men, was gaining respect and influence. But there were some traitors within, hypocrites, who were of the seed of the serpent. Two of them committed a terrible act of hypocrisy by which their evil hearts were exposed; and judgment began at the house of God. Ananias and Sapphira were both killed by the hand of God for lying to the Holy Spirit. The news of what happened that day in the house of God spread like wildfire through the streets of Jerusalem. One of the despised band, along with his wife, had proven himself to be a hypocrite! You can imagine the talk, the snickers, the gossip, the finger pointing.

Church members, professed followers of Christ do often fall just like this wicked pair. Some who, by their actions, appear to be pillars in the church do forsake Christ and his gospel. Pastors, elders, and deacons, evangelists and missionaries, respected men and women in the church fall into sin, forsake Christ, forsake the gospel, forsake the worship of God, and prove to be hypocrites by willfully abandoning all that they know to be right and true. From time to time many who profess to be our Lord's disciples go back and walk no more with him (John 6:66). Every time we see that happen, we ask ourselves and one another, "What is happening? Why have they left us? What effect will this have on the cause of Christ? How is this going to effect the church of God?"

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A CHURCH MEMBER FALLS? Our tendency in the flesh is to be full of doubt and fear. We fear what might happen to the church of God. We fear that the gospel might somehow lose its power and influence because some religious hypocrite has exposed himself. But our fears are without foundation. The honor of God, the purpose of God, and the church of God are safe and secure! Even when reprobate men and women fall from our ranks, our God is graciously accomplishing his purpose in his wise and adorable providence, performing that which is best for his church, and making himself a great and glorious name (Romans 8:28; Psalm 76:10; Isaiah 63:10–14).

Here are five comfortable answers given in the Word of God to the question under consideration in this study—"What happens when a church member falls?"

First, GOD IS SEPARATING THE PRECIOUS FROM THE VILE. From the very beginning local churches have been a mixed multitude of real believers and mere professors. In every field where our Lord sows his wheat Satan plants his tares. Goats, even some wolves have always been found among the Lord's sheep. In every band of true, sincere believers some hypocrites will be found. The names of Judas, Demas, Alexander, Simon Magus, Hymenaeus, Philetus, Diotrephes, Ananias, and Sapphira stand upon the pages of Holy Scripture to warn us of the presence of false professors among the people of God. But God separates the tares from the wheat, the goats from the sheep and the hypocrite from the true believer (Matthew 13:30, 41–43; 1 John 2:19–20).

This separation is the work of God. He plainly commands us to let the tares grow with the wheat, lest we uproot the wheat while trying to get rid of the tares. God knows how to weed his garden. He uses many things to do it. Earthly trials, the preaching of the Word, the temptations of Satan, acts of judgment, even the apostasy of reprobate men are instruments in God's hands by which he separates the precious from the vile (1 Corinthians 11:19).

Secondly, GOD REMINDS US BY THE FALL OF OTHERS THAT SALVATION IS BY HIS GRACE ALONE (1 Corinthians 4:7). Were it not for the grace of God none would persevere in faith (John 6:66–68). Let us never be proud, boastful, or presumptuous. Our only hope before God is the righteousness and blood of Christ our Substitute. Were it not for the fact that Christ holds our hearts we would soon cease to hold him (1 Corinthians 10:11–13). Yet, we rejoice in the comforting assurance that his grace is sufficient, even for us (

2 Corinthians 12:9). "Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world." Without Christ I am nothing and I can do nothing. But in Christ, by the grace of God, I can go on believing. I can persevere even to my final day in faith. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me! His grace is sufficient! He can and will preserve his own. In spite of the weakness, infirmity, and sinfulness of their flesh, "They shall never perish!"

Thirdly, WHENEVER ONE IS TAKEN IN THE SNARE OF THE DEVIL GOD GRACIOUSLY DRAWS HIS SAINTS CLOSER TO CHRIST AND CONFIRMS THEM IN THE FAITH OF THE GOSPEL (Hebrews 6:1–12; 10:38–39). "Mighty men around us falling" reminds us of our own weakness. And every reminder of our weakness in the flesh and of the danger of Satan's devices drives believing hearts to Christ for refuge (Proverbs 18:10). Often we see our companions fall. Our only comfort, security, and rest is in the immutability of God's grace (Malachi 3:6; Lamentations 3:24–26; 2 Timothy 2:15–19).

Fourthly, THOUGH MANY DO FORSAKE CHRIST, GOD SOVEREIGNLY ACCOMPLISHES HIS PURPOSE OF GRACE (Acts 5:14). No real harm has been done. Christ has not lost one of his ransomed ones. The Good Shepherd has not lost one of his sheep. The Son of God has not been defeated by the powers of darkness. Ananias and Sapphira fell and God's judgment fell on them; but their apostasy and God's retribution only caused the people of God to be more fully united to one another. Like a loving family, huddled together in their house for fear of danger, the saints of God were "all with one accord in Solomon's porch," and the Word of God flourished (Acts 5:12–16).

NOTE: Do not allow verse 15 to cause you any trouble. Men and women who do not know God always become superstitious when the power of God is revealed.

Fifthly, THOUGH MANY WHO PROFESS FAITH IN CHRIST DO FALL ALONG THE WAY AND DEPART FROM HIM, YET OUR GOD STILL PRESERVES HIS CHURCH AND MAINTAINS HIS CAUSE IN THIS WORLD (Matthew 16:18; Acts 5:38–39). God's covenant cannot be nullified. His purpose cannot be thwarted. His power cannot be defeated. The church of God is safe. The honor of God is secure. Our God shall yet be universally honored in all the fullness of his Triune glory and saving grace (Rev. 5:9–14). All is well, for the ark of God is safe! Though many do fall, all who truly trust Christ on this earth are as safe and secure as the saints of God in Heaven (1 John 2:1–2; Romans 8:29–39).

"When any turn from Zion's way, (Alas, what numbers do!) Methinks I hear the Savior say, `Will you forsake me too?'

Ah, Lord, with such a heart as mine, Unless You hold me fast, I feel I must, I shall decline, And prove like them at last.

Yet You alone have power I know To save a wretch like me: To whom or wither should I go, If I should turn from You?

What anguish has this question stirred, If I will also go; Yet, Lord, relying on Your word, I answer humbly, No."

16. THE PERSECUTION OF GOD'S CHURCH

Acts 5:17–42

The church of God has always had to endure persecution. Her history is written in the blood of faithful martyrs. Sometimes the persecution is fierce, sometimes more subtle, but it is always there. Usually, the persecution comes not from profligate, base men, but from devout, religious men. The bloodiest persecutions in history have been executed in the name of God! Until Christ comes again, the persecution will not cease (John 15:18, 20; Matthew 10:22).

In Acts 5:17–42 the Holy Spirit gives us a brief description of the second persecution of the church after the resurrection of Christ. (The first was in Acts 4:1–22). Why were these men of God thrown into prison? Why did the religious leaders of their nation want to murder them? The Apostles had not held any political rallies, trying to overthrow the liberal Roman government. They had broken no laws. They were not raising a social protest. They were not even crusading against pornography, prostitution, and homosexuality, the common social ills of their day. They were being persecuted for only one reason—Preaching the gospel of Christ! That is all. They plainly exposed the evil of man's depraved heart, declared the necessity of a Substitute, proclaimed the forgiveness of sins by the grace of God through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and pressed upon all men the claims of Christ, the risen, sovereign Lord. They had also committed the terrible evil of improving their society by healing the sick and teaching their followers to live in righteousness and peace! For these things, and these things alone, they were persecuted, imprisoned, beaten, and threatened with death!

Here are six lessons which the Holy Spirit intends for us to learn from this brief history of the church's second persecution at Jerusalem.

First, THE CROSS OF CHRIST IS AN OFFENSE TO MEN (verses 17–18). This persecution was primarily instigated and carried out by the sect of the Sadducees. They were the liberal, freethinking, broad-minded, religious gentlemen of the day. They did not agree with the fanatical Pharisees. They disapproved of the philosophical pagans. Yet, they were tolerant of both. However, when the Apostles came preaching the gospel of Christ, these nice, religious men were filled with rage and ready to kill! The fact is, broad-minded religionists are broad-minded enough to accept any form of religion that leaves salvation in the hands of man; but the message of salvation by grace alone through the merits of Christ, the sinner's crucified Substitute, is an offense to them (Galatians 5:11). The gospel of Christ is offensive to all, except those who are saved by it (1 Corinthians 1:23–24; Romans 1:15–17).

Second, THE HOLY SPIRIT HERE SHOWS US THAT GOD TAKES CARE OF HIS OWN (verses 19–26). It is written in the Scriptures, "Them that honor me I will honor" (1 Samuel 2:30). If we belong to God, if we serve the interests of his kingdom, if we are seeking his will and his glory, we have no reason to fear any man. "If God be for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31).

"So now the future holds no fear, God guards the work begun,

And mortals are immortal here, Until their work is done!"

Until a believer's work on earth is done, so long as he can be useful in the cause of Christ, until his appointed days are fulfilled and the Lord calls him home, he can be assured of these three things:

1. God will direct his path (Proverbs 3:5–6). 2. God will protect his life (Hebrews 13:5–6).3. God will supply his needs (Psalm 34:10).

Third, THE SPIRIT OF GOD HERE SHOWS US THAT IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EVERY BELIEVER IN THIS WORLD TO OBEY GOD (verses 27–32). The proof of faith in Christ is obedience to him. The fruit of God given faith is obedience to God (1 John 5:1–3). Hebrews 11 is faith's hall of fame. It records the great deeds of faith performed by men and women in obedience to God. The Apostles followed their example. When they were commanded not to preach the gospel of Christ, they not only said they must continue to do so, but they preached Christ to their persecutors. And they did it publicly! They did not consider the consequences of their actions. They knew their duty and they did it. That is faith in action. Our lives, our course of action at any given point in life, must be determined by four things:

1. What does the Word of God require of me? 2. What is the will of God in my present situation? 3. What will best serve the glory of God? 4. What is in the best interest of God's people?

Fourth, THE SPIRIT OF GOD TEACHES THAT GOD'S TRUTH CANNOT BE SILENCED, GOD'S CAUSE CANNOT BE DEFEATED, AND GOD'S KINGDOM CANNOT BE OVERTHROWN (verses 33–40). What an encouraging lesson this is! The truth of God, the cause of God, and the kingdom of God are not in anyway dependent upon men and circumstances! If God is in a thing, if it is of God, it will be successful. Nothing can stop it. God will even use the counsel of Gamaliel to preserve his work!

There is much in these verses of Scripture for the comfort and encouragement of every preacher and every congregation of believers. God's man in God's place doing God's work will be maintained by God's hand. There is no need for compromise, fear, or even hesitation. God will promote the gospel we preach by the power of his Spirit. He will provide for the needs of his church by the hand of his providence (Ezra 4:2–3; Genesis 14:22–23). God will protect his cause in this world (Ezra 8:22–23).

Fifth, learn this lesson—IT IS AN HONOR FOR ANYONE TO SERVE THE CAUSE OF CHRIST IN THIS WORLD, EVEN IF YOUR SERVICE IS TO SUFFER FOR THE HONOR OF HIS NAME (v. 41). Shortly after I was converted, I was asked to serve as the janitor at our church. I counted it an honor to keep the house of God clean and comfortable as a place where sinners could hear the gospel and worship Christ. It is a great mercy and honor that now I am called to preach the gospel of Christ. If I am counted worthy of suffering abuse, reproach, and scorn for doing so, that too is my honor. I am astonished that God is pleased to use me in any way for his honor!

Sixth, WE ARE HERE TAUGHT THAT OUR ONE BUSINESS AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THIS WORLD IS TO PREACH THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST. Those Apostles were given an angelic commission (verses 19, 20) and they were obedient to it (v. 42). You and I have the same commission. Every man and woman who is born of God is a missionary sent by God into the world to preach the gospel. Not all are called and gifted to be public preachers. (No woman is allowed to do that—1 Timothy 2:11–12). But all who have seen Christ are his witnesses. All who know him are to proclaim him (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:8).

God has chosen to save sinners by using saved sinners to tell them of his great grace in Christ (Matthew 22:8–9; Luke 14:21–23; John 1:35–45). "Go, and speak to the people all the words of this life!"

17. "A PRINCE AND A SAVIOR"

Acts 5:31

When Peter and the rest of the Apostles stood before the high priest and the Sadducees, they were commanded not to teach or preach in the name of the Lord Jesus. "Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men" (v. 29). They gave three specific reasons why they had to go on preaching Christ and him crucified to all who would hear them.

1. Jesus Christ is the exalted Lord of glory. "The God of our fathers has raised up Jesus, whom you slew and hanged on a tree. Him has God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Savior" (verses 30–31). If Jesus Christ is indeed our only Lord, we must obey him!

2. This Prince and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the sinner's only hope. God has exalted him "to be a Prince and a Savior, for to give repentance to Israel, and the forgiveness of sins" (v. 31). Sinners have no hope without Christ. He alone can give life to dead sinners. Christ alone can change the heart. Only Christ can forgive sin. If we do not tell perishing sinners about him, they will perish forever under the wrath of God.

3. "And we are his witnesses" (v. 32). The Apostles were the representatives of Messiah, the Prince. They were, by the power of God the Holy Spirit, acting by the authority of God himself. They asserted that their teaching and preaching could not be set aside by any earthly, human authority, civil or ecclesiastical. Are we his witnesses? If so, we are under constraint of love and allegiance to Christ our almighty, sovereign King, to proclaim him to men, in so far as we are able to fill the world with his doctrine.

Our mission as his witnesses is twofold. First and foremost, we seek to exalt, magnify, and glorify the name of God our Savior. Above all else, let us seek the glory of God (1 Kings 18:36–37). Second, we seek the salvation of God's elect, realizing that it is not possible for sinners to be saved until they know Christ and that they cannot know him unless someone tells them who he is and what he has done (Romans 1:16–17; 10:13–17; 1 Corinthians 1:21–23; Matthew 28:18–20).

WHO IS THE LORD JESUS CHRIST? We know that Jesus Christ is God (John 1:1–3). We also know that Christ Jesus is a real man, God incarnate (2 Timothy 3:16; Isaiah 9:6). He is the God-man, as much God as though he were not man and as much man as though he were not God. But, in the text under consideration, the Holy Spirit describes the Lord Jesus Christ in his saving character as "a Prince (King) and a Savior." That person who is so taught of God that in his heart he knows Christ as both "a Prince and a Savior" is a saved person. He bows to Christ as his Prince and trusts him as his Savior. Some see Christ only as a Prince to regulate their lives. So they have a lifeless religion of laws and works. Others see Christ only as a Savior to keep them out of Hell. Because they do not recognize Christ's Lordship, they live as licentious antinomians. Their religion, having no real effect upon their hearts and lives, is a useless religion. Only those who see the Lord Jesus Christ as both "a Prince and a Savior" are true believers. True believers resign themselves to Christ's will and subject the passions of their souls to Christ their glorious Prince. They yield themselves to his will, direction, and control as their Lord. At the same time they trust Christ as their Savior, realizing the infinite sufficiency of his righteousness and the infinite merit of his blood as the sinners' Substitute for the pardon of sin and everlasting acceptance with God.

No one is saved until he bows to Christ the Prince, acknowledging him as his Lord (Romans 10:9–10; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Luke 14:25–33). "No man has truly given himself to Christ until he has said, ‘My Lord, I give you this day my body, my soul, my power, my talents, my goods, my house, my children, and all that I have. Henceforth, I hold them at your will, as a steward under you. Your they are. As for me, I have nothing. I have surrendered all to thee!' " (C. H. Spurgeon) If we would have Christ as our Savior, we must have him as our Prince, our Lord and King. If he is not our Ruler and Commander, he is not our Savior. One of the first instincts of a new born soul is to fall at the Savior's feet in adoring, worshipful submission, crying, "Lord, what will you have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). A person saved by the grace of God does not need to be told that he is under solemn obligations to serve Christ. The new life within tells him that! It is no burden to the believing heart to be under Christ's yoke. It is our delight! He who believes gladly surrenders to Christ as his Master (1 John 5:2). As soon as a sinner sees the glory and grace of God in Christ by faith, he willingly bows before his throne crying,

"All to Jesus I surrender, all to Him I freely give! I will ever love and trust Him, in His presence daily live."

Christ must be acknowledged as our rightful Prince and trusted as our only Savior. He is a Prince with sovereign authority and power. He is a Savior with infinite merit and grace. Jesus Christ, the God-man, has established the grounds of salvation—RIGHTEOUSNESS! He has paid the price for salvation—HIS OWN BLOOD! And he possesses the POWER to save all who come to God by him (Hebrews 7:25; John 17:2).

WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS OF SALVATION? That may appear to be a strange question to some, but Acts 5:31 sets before us two things required by God, two conditions that must be met before a holy, righteous, and just God can save any sinner. They are "repentance and forgiveness of sins."

REPENTANCE is the work and gift of God's goodness and grace (Romans 2:4; Zechariah 12:10). It is a change of character, a change of heart brought about by the regenerating power and grace of God the Holy Spirit. Without genuine repentance there is no faith in the heart, no salvation wrought in the soul, no true hope of life to come (Isaiah 55:6–7; Matthew 9:13; Mark 6:12; Luke 13:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 20:21; 2 Timothy 2:25; Rev. 2:5). Repentance is constant. Like faith, it is a life long grace. Yet, repentance is no grounds for salvation. Repentance cannot satisfy justice and atone for sin.

FORGIVENESS must be granted by God our Savior. In order for a holy, just God to forgive sin four things must be done: (1) The sinner must be punished. (2) Justice must be satisfied. (3) The sin must be removed, put away, annihilated from record. And (4) the sinner must be made righteous. This can be accomplished only through the substitutionary sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ and the free imputation of his righteousness to us by the grace of God (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 3:24–26).

THIS REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS OF SINS IS THE GIFT OF CHRIST TO ALL THE ISRAEL OF GOD, TO ALL WHO LOOK TO HIM IN FAITH. Every sinner who looks to Christ is forgiven of all sin forever and is saved (Isaiah 45:22). Once a sinner knows that he is forgiven, he truly repents of his sins (Psalm 32:1–5; 51:1–17; Zechariah 12:10).

18. "COUNTED WORTHY TO SUFFER"

Acts 5:17–18, 26–41

The Apostles of Christ were called into court by the Jewish Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin were the 70 top dogs in Israel. They were the most highly respected, most influential, and thought to be the most spiritual, godly men of the religious world. Normally they were very tolerant. But the Apostles of Christ were publicly proclaiming Christ as the only Lord and Savior of men; and they were doing it in the temple! The Sanhedrin thought the temple belonged to them, but it was God's temple. The angel of the Lord expressly commanded these men to go to the temple, the place where God's name was profaned, and preach the gospel there, even though the people who worshiped there despised the God they claimed to worship (v. 20).

The leaders of the Jewish church, these guardians of the temple, would have killed God's preachers on the spot, but they feared that such action would stir up the wrath of the people. Therefore, because it was politically expedient to do so, they spared the lives of God's servants, but just barely. The word "beaten" in verse 40 means "to skin". It is the same word that would be used to describe the skinning of an animal. These men were brutally scourged with a whip, a whip designed to rip the skin from the body! It was not uncommon for men to die from these beatings. In the very next verse we read—"And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" (v. 41).

Their bodies were full of pain, but their hearts were full of joy, "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for Christ." They considered it a high honor bestowed upon them that God would allow such worthless, sinful creatures as they were to suffer for the honor of Christ. They rejoiced in his faithfulness to them, knowing that "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able; but will with the temptation make a way to escape, that you may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). It is truly an honor to suffer patiently as a Christian for the honor of Christ (1 Peter 4:16).

WHAT IS THE CAUSE OF OUR SUFFERING? Everyone knows something about suffering. Some suffer more than others and some less, but all suffer. Basically, all that we suffer in this world is either physical pain or spiritual distress. We suffer physically, in the flesh; and we suffer spiritually in the heart, the soul, and the mind. Like Job, we recognize that all we suffer must ultimately be traced to the hand of our God (Job 2:10; Romans 8:28; 11:36). We rejoice to know that "all things are of God" (2 Corinthians 5:18). Realizing that all suffering is ordered, like all other things, by the providential rule of our God, the sufferings of God's children in this world may be traced to four subordinate causes.

1. COSMIC SUFFERING—There are some things men and women suffer simply because we live in this world. These are common to all since the fall of our father Adam. Sin has made this world a place of sorrow, pain, and suffering. All people, believers and unbelievers, suffer from satanic oppression (Job 1:12; 2:7–8; Matthew 8:26–34; 15:22; 2 Corinthians 12:7). Satan is not only God's enemy, he is the subtle, crafty, powerful enemy of all mankind. Though governed by the hand of God's providence, Satan causes people to suffer both mentally and physically. We also suffer because of sin. Because all are sinners all are sufferers. Were it not for sin there would be no thorns of sorrow, thistles of suffering, sweat of fever, or death in the world. Moreover, by acts of sin men and women bring certain evils upon themselves. Because of sin we are all suffering, mortal, dying creatures.

2. CIRCUMSTANTIAL SUFFERINGS—From time to time people suffer simply because of their circumstances. In times of famine, plague, and war both the righteous and the wicked suffer, though even then the children of God are under his special care (Psalm 91:1–16).

3. CONSCIENTIOUS SUFFERINGS—Frequently, the saints of God choose to suffer for Christ as a matter of conscience (Acts 4:18–20; 5:29–32; Hebrews 11:24–26). They willingly take up their cross and follow Christ. They willingly choose pain and sorrow, even persecution and death, rather than disobey the will of God, violate the Word of God, or compromise the truth of God. Men and women of faith and conviction make great personal sacrifices, deliberately, for the honor of Christ (Matthew 10:34–38; Mark 8:34–38; Luke 14:25–33).

4. CORRECTIVE SUFFERINGS—Like a loving, caring Father, our God chastens his children for their eternal, spiritual good (Hebrews 12:1–5). God does not punish his elect for sin! He punished us for our sins in Christ when he suffered the wrath of God as our Substitute (Romans 3:24–26; Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 3:18).

"Payment God cannot twice demand, First at my bleeding Surety's hand And then again at mine!"

God will not punish sin where he will not impute sin; and God will not impute sin to his elect, whose sins were imputed to Christ (Romans 4:8; 8:33–34). The only place where God deals with the sins of his elect in a penal way is Calvary! When God chastens us it is not to punish us, but to correct us (Psalm 119; 65–71).

WHEN CAN IT BE SAID THAT A PERSON IS SUFFERING FOR CHRIST? A person is not suffering for Christ when his sufferings are the result of his own evil actions or attitude. Neither is one suffering for Christ when he wallows in self-pity, murmuring and complaining against God. But there are some living martyrs in this world, men and women who hazard their lives for the name of Christ (Acts 15:26).

To suffer for Christ is to suffer patiently, trusting God's providence and believing his promise (1 Peter 2:20–24). Job, Eli, Moses, and Paul were all examples of such suffering (Job 2:10; Hebrews 11:24–26; 1 Samuel 3:18; 2 Corinthians 12:9). We ought to follow their examples.

Those who willingly expose themselves to pain, affliction, and heartache for the honor of Christ suffer for his name's sake. The Apostles knew what the consequences of their actions would be. They had been forewarned (Acts 4:21). Many pay a high price for confessing Christ, worshiping him, and obeying him, and consider it a high honor to do so. The martyrs who were burned at the stake in England died simply because they refused to say that the bread and wine of the Lord's Table are the body and blood of Christ! John Bunyan spent twelve years in Bedford jail because he would not agree not to preach in the town of Bedford, England!

To suffer for Christ is to be a true believer. It is to lose your life for him. It is to obey him, follow him, submit to him, and trust him, regardless of cost or consequence. To refuse to suffer for Christ is to deny him (Matthew 10:16, 22, 24, 28, 31–39).

Every believer will, as long as he lives in this world, be called to suffer for his Savior's name. But you have these promises: You will not be forsaken (Isaiah 41:10; 43:1–5). You will never suffer more than you can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13). Christ will keep you (John 10:28). God will honor you (1 Peter 1:7). If you would learn how to suffer for Christ look to Christ (Hebrews 12:1–5).

19. THE FIRST SEVEN DEACONS

Acts 6:1–7

The church at Jerusalem grew in a very short time from 120 to several thousand members! This early church, though a great multitude, was a community of love and care. They had all things common. Many sold their estates and gave the money to the church. There were also many in the congregation who were poor. These poor ones, particularly the fatherless and the widows, were clothed, fed, and housed with church funds. But a problem arose. Some of the Grecian widows were being neglected (or at least thought they were), not receiving an equal share of daily compensation with those widows from Judea (v. 1). Several things in this passage deserve our attention.

THOUGH THE CHURCH SUFFERED MUCH PERSECUTION, IT CONTINUED, BY THE GRACE OF GOD, TO GROW. Like Israel in Egypt, the more it was afflicted, the more it multiplied. The work of God, the cause of Christ, and the success of the gospel cannot be hindered by man or even Hell itself (Matthew 16:18).

WHEN THE CHURCH INCREASED STRIFE AND DISCORD AROSE FROM WITHIN! Until now they had been of one accord (Acts 1:14; 2:1, 46; 4:24; 5:12). They had been one in heart, mind, and purpose, serving the interests of Christ and one another. But when they began to multiply, they corrupted themselves. They increased in numbers, but not in joy. Like Abraham and Lot, when the family increased, there was strife. "There arose a murmuring," not an open falling out, but a petty strife, nurtured by selfishness and pride (Proverbs 16:28; 17:14, 19; 26:21; 28:25).

OF ALL THINGS, THE COMPLAINT WAS ABOUT MONEY! It is a great pity that the insignificant things of this world should ever cause strife between those who profess to be taken up with the far greater things of the world to come. Yet, this evil is so often repeated that it must not be ignored. "The love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). It blinds the eye and perverts the judgment of men (Exodus 23:8). Most every spat between a husband and wife is about money! Most every sore spot in a family has something to do with money or other earthly possessions! Most church splits begin with strife about money! How sad!

NO CHURCH HAS EVER BEEN PURE AND PERFECT, AND NO CHURCH IN THIS WORLD EVER WILL BE. Any congregation of believers will, from time to time, have problems to face, deal with, and overcome. Never forsake the church of God, or the local church to which you belong, because a problem arises. Instead, work together with God's saints to overcome the problem. Husbands and wives do not break up the family because they have a little spat. Neither should we allow petty differences to break up the household of faith. Let us rather yield to one another and serve one another (Philippians 2:1–5; Ephesians 4:1–6).

IN ORDER TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM AND TO PREVENT SUCH PROBLEMS IN THE FUTURE, THE APOSTLES, UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, ESTABLISHED A NEW OFFICE IN THE CHURCH, THE OFFICE OF DEACON. Acts 6:1–7 records the establishment of this office.* These first seven deacons were chosen to meet a specific need in the church. Seven were chosen because seven were needed, but that certainly does not imply that every church needs seven deacons.

Why was the deacon's office established? God ordained this office in his church for one specific and noble reason—Deacons are to relieve their pastors of all secular, worldly concern, so that those who preach the gospel may give themselves entirely to the ministry of the Word (1 Timothy 4:12–16; 2 Timothy 2:4; 4:1–5; Acts 6:2–3). No man can properly give himself to more than one weighty employment. Therefore the churches of God have deacons whose responsibility it is to see that their pastors have no need to concern themselves with mundane affairs. Deacons must take care to see that the material needs of the pastor and his family are met. Deacons are to make certain that the church property and church members are cared for properly. Deacons are to distribute the church's funds for the ministry of the Word and the care of the poor (1 Corinthians 16:2). Deacons are servants. They serve tables, the Lord's table, the pastor's table, the tables of God's saints.

How were the first deacons chosen? Without doubt, the church at Jerusalem met in several congregations scattered throughout the area. The apostles called together the preachers from these congregations and instructed them to choose from among the saints of God "seven men (no women) of good report". Then those men were ordained to the work. This much is certain: The deacons were all men. They were chosen in compliance with the apostles instructions. They were chosen from among the members of the church. And they were permanently ordained in the office, not installed for a short term.

What kind of men were the deacons to be? The Word of God clearly describes the character of those men who may be properly ordained to the office of deacon. They are not to be chosen upon the basis of friendship, but of faithfulness. Carefully read Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:8–12. These two passages tell us what the qualifications of a deacon are. No man should ever be placed in this high office who does not meet the qualifications given in the Word of God.

What is the work for which deacons are ordained? The word "deacon" means "servant". A deacon is a man who serves Christ's church, the interests of the gospel, and the pastor who proclaims the gospel to him. As the first seven deacons were chosen to relieve the apostles of the burden of caring for the poor, so it is the work of deacons to do whatever they can to relieve their pastor of any burden or care that would in anyway distract him from the preaching of the gospel.

What affect did the service of these seven deacons have upon the church of Christ and the ministry of the gospel? Because of the quiet, unassuming, faithful service of these first seven deacons, the Word of God increased and many of God's elect were converted (v. 7). The gospel was preached where it could not have been preached, if these men had not relieved the apostles. And the church of God grew. Faithful deacons are an asset to any congregation and an asset to any pastor's labors. Pastors, elders, and deacons, together with the membership of the local church, labor together in the cause of Christ. Those deacons who labor faithfully as deacons earn the respect and esteem of their pastor and of the church (1 Timothy 3:13).

20. STEPHEN—A FAITHFUL SERVANT

Acts 6:8–15

Stephen was a Hellenistic Jew, a Jew by birth, but one born in Greece. The apostles were all Galileans. They were, in the eyes of men, a crude, uneducated rabble of fishermen and tax-collectors. When Peter and John stood before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4, they were perceived to be "unlearned and ignorant men." But Stephen was a preacher of a different kind. He was from another culture. He was a man of learning, education, and refinement. He was a man of rank and reputation. Some of the historians tell us that, like Saul of Tarsus, (before whom he boldly defended the gospel of Christ {Acts 7:58}), Stephen was trained at the feet of Gamaliel. As we study the history of his death, we learn the dominate character of his life. Stephen was a faithful man, faithful to the gospel, faithful to the church of God, faithful to Christ, faithful unto death. He is an example of faithfulness, held up for all who would honor God to follow (Hebrews 13:7). Here are four lessons set before us by God the Holy Spirit in this portion of His Word.

First, in verse 8 we learn that FAITHFULNESS IS THE ONE THING GOD REQUIRES OF HIS SERVANTS AND THE ONE THING GOD HONORS IN HIS SERVANTS. First, Stephen served God as a member of his church, then as a deacon, then as a gospel preacher. As he had been faithful and diligent in serving tables he was faithful in preaching the gospel. He was a man with uncommon gifts, talents, and abilities. Yet, he thought it was an honor to serve as a deacon in God's church, an honor to distribute food to the poor. Stephen used the office of a deacon well and thereby purchased to himself a good degree and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 3:13).

God's people are his servants in this world. It matters not what our service is, where our service is, or who is aware of our service. The only thing that matters is that we faithfully serve our God (1 Corinthians 4:2). Be faithful in the place of your calling (1 Corinthians 7:20–23), in the work God has given you to do, and with the possessions God has trusted to your hands (Proverbs 3:9–10). Honor God in all things and with all things, and he will honor you (1 Samuel 2:30). There is much that you cannot do; but, by the grace of God, you can be faithful (Matthew 13:12; Luke 16:10).

Stephen was a man "full of faith." That is what the word faithful means, "full of faith." He believed God. He knew and believed the Word of God, trusted the Son of God, obeyed the will of God, and found contentment with the providence of God. Because he was full of faith, he was "full of power." He preached the gospel, taught the people, and defended the truth of God with power, boldness, and courage. Faith makes naturally timid men courageous and bold. And the confidence of faith makes gospel preachers powerful. The man who believes what he preaches, preaches with power. Being full of faith and power, Stephen "did great wonders and miracles among the people." In this way God confirmed his work. You can be certain that if God sends a man to preach the gospel, he will confirm that man as his messenger and confirm his word from that man in the hearts of his people.

Secondly, read verses 9 and 10 and know that EVERY WORD SPOKEN FOR GOD AND EVERY WORK DONE FOR GOD ACCOMPLISHES ITS PURPOSE. Saul of Tarsus was probably the chief spokesman of those with whom Stephen was disputing. Tarsus was in Cilicia. And Saul was present at this time (Acts 7:58). Though Stephen convinced none, though none were converted at the time, though none believed the gospel, though the preacher himself was stoned to death, this faithful servant of God had successfully accomplished what God sent him to do. Only eternity will tell, but I suspect that Stephen's sermon never stopped ringing in Saul's ears, until he found himself in the dust crying, "What will you have me to do, Lord?"

Two things and two things alone determine the success of any man's or any church's labors for the glory of God and the souls of men: The purpose of God and the power of God (Isaiah 55:11; 2 Corinthians 2:15–16; 3:5–6; 4:7). We are entirely dependent upon God! If we are God's servants, doing God's service, failure is an impossibility. No one serves God in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). Sometimes a man preaches one sermon in the power of the Spirit and thousands are saved, as on the day of Pentecost. Sometimes a man preaches thousands of sermons in the power of the Spirit before one sinner is saved, as was the case with the missionary Adroniram Judson in Burma. Sometimes the preacher is killed and the one God saves turns out to have been one of his murderers, as was the case here. God does his will, even when he obscures it from sight (Proverbs 16:33).

Thirdly, verses 11–14 demonstrate the fact that THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST IS OFFENSIVE TO MEN. When these religious men were convinced that Stephen's doctrine was the truth of God revealed in Holy Scripture, when they could not resist his arguments, they still would not yield to the claims of Christ. Instead, they hired false witnesses to twist and pervert Stephen's words.

Nothing has changed. Until a sinner's heart is changed by the regenerating grace of God, he will not receive the gospel of the grace of God. Salvation by grace, through the merits of a crucified Substitute, received by faith alone, without works is both foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:22–25) and offensive to him (Galatians 5:11). It offends his pride, his religious notions, his love of self, and his self-righteousness. Any man who boldly declares the gospel of Christ to lost, unbelieving religionists will be marked by them as a hard man and a bitter enemy (Galatians 4:16). When the pearls of the gospel (free forgiveness, effectual atonement, imputed righteousness, and infallible, irresistible grace) are cast before swine, they will trample the pearls in the mud to get at the one who preaches God's free grace in Christ, and will destroy him if they can.

Fourthly, verse 15 shows us that GOD IS FAITHFUL TO HIS FAITHFUL SERVANTS. Stephen's conscience was pure and free from guilt with regard to the charges made against him. Therefore, he had nothing to fear. What he had said and done had been for the glory of God. He knew he had done nothing but serve the honor of God, the will of God, the interests of his kingdom, his gospel, and his people. Therefore, in the face of death, he was calm and courageous; so much so that his face looked as bright, happy, and radiant as the face of an angel. In the hour of his greatest trial he did not forsake his God and his God did not forsake him (Hebrews 13:5–6).

What an example Stephen is. Let us be faithful servants to Christ, our God and Savior. If we willingly serve him in all things, he will use us as he sees fit for his glory. He will give us grace to do his will. He will crown us with life everlasting (Rev. 2:10).

21. A SERMON THAT COST A PREACHER HIS LIFE

Acts 7:1–60

Stephen had been accused of speaking blasphemy against the law and the temple because he told the Jews that the Lord Jesus Christ had fulfilled all the types of the law and satisfied all its demands, and that all forms of carnal worship must be obliterated (Acts 6:8–15; John 4:23–24; Colossians 2:8–23). In Acts 7 the Holy Spirit has preserved a transcript of Stephen's last sermon, a sermon preached to the sanhedrin, a sermon that cost him his life. What did Stephen preach that so greatly enraged these religious leaders? These men were known to be tolerant and compromising with one another. That is how they held their "denomination" together. But when Stephen had finished his sermon they stoned him to death! Why? What did he say to infuriate them so?

IMPLIED THROUGHOUT STEPHEN'S SERMON IS THE DOCTRINE OF GOD'S ABSOLUTE SOVEREIGNTY IN PROVIDENCE. Beginning with the call of Abraham, Stephen showed how that everything in the history of the Old Testament pointed to Christ and was fulfilled by him. He demonstrated how that God gradually unfolds and accomplishes his sovereign purpose of redemption and grace in providence.

THE LORD OUR GOD IS A GOD OF PURPOSE (Isaiah 14:26; Romans 8:28; 9:11; Ephesians 1:11; 3:11; 2 Timothy 1:9). His purpose is good, wise, and full of grace. It includes all things. Nothing takes God by surprise. His purpose in all things is the spiritual, eternal good of his elect and the glory of his own great name. His purpose is fixed, unalterable, and immutable (Isaiah 46:9–11). It cannot be changed, thwarted, or overturned. Therefore "we know that all things work together for good to them that love God to them who are the called according to his purpose!" If God's eternal purpose could be altered to any degree, then no promises, prophecies, or threats recorded in the Bible could be believed. We can trust God only to the extent that we recognize his immutability. We can believe the Scriptures only to the extent that we recognize the universality and immutability of God's purpose (Romans 11:33–36).

Predestination is the purpose of God. Providence is the unfolding and accomplishment of God's purpose. Everything that God has done or has allowed to be done, is doing or allows to be done, and shall do or shall allow to be done is for the spiritual, eternal good of his elect, to the praise and glory of his own great name. In the end everyone shall be made to see this (Rev. 4:11; 5:11–14). Beginning with Abraham, Stephen showed the unfolding of God's eternal purpose until the coming of Christ for the accomplishment of the redemption of his people. Apart from Christ and his great work of redemption the history of the Jews and all that is recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures would be meaningless (Luke 24:27, 44–47).

ALL THE EVENTS OF OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY POINTED TO THE COMING OF CHRIST AND REDEMPTION BY HIM (verses 1–47). The whole purpose for which the Bible has been written is to reveal the grace and glory of God in the substitutionary, redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:45). The bulk of Stephen's sermon is consumed with one theme: He shows that all the events of Old Testament history were arranged by Divine providence to reveal God's eternal purpose of grace in the redemption of sinners by Christ.

God's covenant with Abraham was a partial revelation of the covenant of grace made with Christ our Surety before the world was made (verses 1–8; Hebrews 7:22; Jeremiah 31:31–34). In that covenant a seed was promised (v. 5; Galatians 3:26). It was purposed that that chosen seed should fall into bondage (v. 6), even as God's elect fell into the bondage of sin by Adam's transgression. Deliverance was promised (v. 7) by which the glory of God would be revealed. That deliverance of Israel out of Egypt was a beautiful picture of our redemption by the blood of Christ and the power of his grace. The sign and seal of that covenant was circumcision (v. 8). Circumcision was typical of the regeneration of God's elect by the Holy Spirit, by which he separates his own elect from the rest of the world and seals to their hearts all the blessings of covenant grace (Colossians 2:11; Ephesians 1:3, 13–14).

Joseph was sent of God into Egypt to preserve his people alive (verses 9–17). In all things he was a type of Christ. He was the delight of his father (Matthew 3:17; Proverbs 8:30). He was despised and rejected by his brethren (Isaiah 53:3). He was in the place of God, by God's appointment and arrangement (Genesis 50:19–20; Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). When his brothers bowed before Joseph they were saved alive and accepted by Pharaoh (v. 13; Romans 10:9–10).

Moses was sent to deliver God's covenant people from the bondage of Egypt (verses 18–37). He too was a type of Christ (verses 22, 35–37). He was a man approved of God (Acts 2:22). He was a prophet (John 3:2). He was a deliverer, by blood and by power. From the day that Israel came out of Egypt they wandered from God, rejected his counsel, and despised his prophets. But God's purpose could not be defeated, not even by the unbelief and idolatry of the chosen nation (verses 38–43; Romans 3:3–4).

The Lord established temporary houses of worship which were to prepare the people for the coming of Christ, but they turned the ordinance of God into idolatry (verses 44–47). The tabernacle and its furnishings, first erected in the wilderness (among Gentiles), was a picture of redemption. The temple was a picture of God's church, of the glory of God dwelling in her, and of her dwelling in the glory of God forever. These blessed objects which should have prepared the hearts of men to receive Christ, the unbelieving Jews turned into idolatrous objects of worship. They became barriers to faith!

NOW THAT CHRIST HAS COME AND REDEMPTION HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED BY HIM ALL CARNAL ORDINANCES OF OLD TESTAMENT WORSHIP ARE FOREVER ABOLISHED (verses 48–50). God has forever abolished Jewish, legal worship (Hebrews 10:1–4). Any reliance upon outward, visible symbols (statues, pictures, crosses, temples, altars, etc.) is idolatry. God cannot be worshiped by the employment of carnal rudiments of the world. All true worship is spiritual (John 4:23–24; Philippians 3:3).

Stephen then declared that CONTINUED, WILLFUL REJECTION OF DIVINE TRUTH RESULTS IN ETERNAL REPROBATION (verses 51–53). God will not trifle with those who trifle with him (Proverbs 1:23–33; Matthew 23:37–38). Though the Jews, being rejected of God, rejected his Son, God's purpose was not affected (Romans 3:3–4; 11:11, 22, 23, 26).

OUR GREAT GOD EVEN OVERRULES AND USES THE HANDS OF WICKED MEN TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSE OF GRACE TOWARD HIS ELECT (verses 54–60; Psalm 76:10). The stoning of Stephen was an inexcusable act of wickedness on the part of these men. Yet, it was overruled by God and used by him to accomplish his great purpose of grace. It was best for Stephen. He went to glory! It was best for Saul of Tarsus. It was one of those works of prevenient grace that prepared the way for grace to come to him. It was best for God's church. Soon she would have another apostle, whose conversion, no doubt, had its roots here. It was best for the glory of God! IN THE LIGHT OF THESE THINGS WE SHOULD LEARN TO TRUST THE WISE AND GOOD PROVIDENCE OF OUR GOD!

22. STEPHEN AND SAUL

Acts 7:54–60

The first martyr in the history of God's church was Stephen, a faithful deacon, a preaching deacon, but a deacon. The death of this faithful man is recorded more fully than the death of anyone else in the New Testament except that of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is a man dying for the testimony of Christ, dying by the hands of wicked men, but dying in grace and dying graciously for the glory of God.

The Spirit of God directed Luke to identify just one of Stephen's murderers. Those who stoned Stephen "laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." Saul was probably the man who examined Stephen and had been baffled by his speech when he stood before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:8–10).

HERE IS A STRIKING CONTRAST—Stephen and Saul. Both of them are in glory now. One cannot help wondering how Saul felt when Stephen's smile met him at the throne! What a joyous meeting they must have had—Stephen and Saul embracing one another! But in the text before us the two men are poles apart. They had nothing in common. Stephen was about to die. Saul was holding the clothes of those who stoned him. Saul was a proud, self-righteous Pharisee. He was proud of his pedigree, his learning, his works, his religious position, and his great reputation. Stephen was a broken, humbled sinner, saved by the grace of God, whose only hope was in Christ. Saul was wrapped up in himself. Stephen was wrapped up in Christ. His heart was elated not by looking into a mirror, but by looking to Christ, his exalted Lord. He drew his comfort not from what he had done, but from what Christ had done for him. Saul was a religious ritualist. He placed great weight and importance on the externals of religion. To him, the law, the temple, the priesthood, and the ceremonies were everything. Stephen's religion was a matter of the heart, a living, spiritual union with God in Christ. He put external matters in their proper place (Philippians 3:3; Acts 7:48–50). He did not at all despise those outward forms of religion ordained of God. But he knew that religious ceremony without faith in Christ is useless (Isaiah 1:10–15). Saul thought God was impressed with rituals and ceremonies. Stephen knew what few know—"The Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7; Luke 16:15). Saul defended his religion. For the defense of his religion he was willingly cunning, cruel, and callous. Stephen defended the cause of Christ, even at the cost of his own life. The cause of Christ, his church, his truth, and his glory were of greater value to Stephen than life itself. Stephen was gracious to the end, ever truthful, gentle, forgiving, and self-sacrificing. Here are five things to be learned from this paragraph of Holy Scripture and the contrast here given of Stephen and Saul.

1. EVERY BELIEVER'S LIFE AND TESTIMONY IN THIS WORLD IS IMPORTANT, INFLUENTIAL, AND USEFUL. It does matter greatly how you live in this world if you profess to be a believer, a follower of Christ. There are some people who have no knowledge of Christ and his gospel except what they hear from you and see in you. To them you represent the Son of God and the gospel of his grace. Be sure you are a good representative (Titus 2:10).

Saul's first introduction to genuine Christianity, his first experience with a true believer was Stephen. Stephen was the first person to tell Saul about Christ and the gospel of his grace. At first he despised both the message and the messenger. But he never forgot it! In God's time it had a profound efficacy upon his heart. From Stephen's lips Saul heard a faithful declaration of the gospel of God's grace and glory in Christ. He saw in Stephen a believer who was thoroughly committed to Christ. He saw a believer die in faith. In God's time all these things had their impact upon him.

2. GOD WILL ALWAYS PRESERVE A WITNESS FOR HIMSELF. We are always reluctant to lose any from the ranks of God's church, especially one of great service and usefulness. We appear to be fearful that the church simply cannot continue to function without certain men. But it is not so. God has always preserved sufficient witnesses for himself and always will until Christ comes. God's cause is safe in God's hands! The church lost Stephen, a man of great usefulness. But God had his eye on Saul, a man he would make even more useful. The Lord always has a successor for any man he is pleased to use. When Elijah was taken up to Heaven, Elisha was waiting to carry his mantle. God is never in short supply of men to work in his vineyard.

3. IT IS GOOD FOR BELIEVERS TO REMEMBER WHERE THEY WERE WHEN GOD SAVED THEM AND WHAT THEY ARE BY NATURE. The Holy Spirit put these words in the Book of Inspiration as a fact to be remembered—"The witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." They are words which were meant to keep Paul humble; and they always did. He never forgot what happened at Jerusalem that day (Acts 22:19–20; 1 Timothy 1:12–17).

We must never forget where we were when grace found us (Isaiah 51:1). We must never forget what we were and are by nature. We must never forget what God has saved us from (Ephesians 2:1–4), and what he has done for us in Christ (1 Corinthians 6:9–11; 1 John 3:1–3). Such a memory will make us grateful. He loves much who is forgiven much (Luke 7:36–50). Such grateful remembrance will make the gospel of God's distinguishing grace precious. All who have been saved acknowledge, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10). Thank God for electing love, redeeming blood, regenerating grace, and preserving power! Grace alone makes us to differ from those who are damned (1 Corinthians 4:7; Romans 9:16). This gives us hope for others too. He who saved Saul of Tarsus can save me. He who saved me can save you. He who saved us can save anyone. His blood is sufficient! His grace is sufficient! His power is sufficient! Jesus Christ is an able Savior (Hebrews 7:25).

4. OUR GREAT GOD GRACIOUSLY OVERRULES ALL THINGS FOR THE GOOD OF HIS ELECT AND THE GLORY OF HIS NAME. As we saw in the previous lesson, the stoning of Stephen, though it was a terrible act of barbaric cruelty and sin, was best, the very best thing that could have happened on that day. God was in total control of the situation. "If Saul had not been there, Stephen would not have prayed for him" (Spurgeon). "If Stephen had not prayed, Saul would have never preached" (Augustine). Even the evil performed by men and devils is good for God's elect and shall bring praise to his name (

Psalm 76:10; Proverbs 12:21; 16:7; Romans 8:28; 1 Peter 3:12–13).

5. WHEN THE TIME COMES, GOD GIVES HIS BELIEVING PEOPLE GRACE TO DIE WELL. Those who die in the arms of Christ, who die in faith, die well. What God did for Stephen, he will do essentially for all who trust Christ. Stephen died, being full of the Holy Spirit, with his heart fixed on Christ, looking up steadfastly into Heaven. He died without a care in the world, trusting his sovereign Substitute, calling on the name of God. He saw Heaven opened! He saw the glory of God! He saw the Lord Jesus standing in the place of power to receive him! He died without any malice in his heart! He did not really die at all (John 11:25–26). He simply dropped the body of death. He fell asleep in the arms of Christ and woke up in glory, in life!

23. IS YOUR HEART RIGHT IN THE SIGHT OF GOD

Acts 8:1–25

The eighth chapter of Acts is a historic narrative. It records a brief, but very important segment of church history, showing us how the early church endured persecution from its beginning. This chapter also records the rapid spread of the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Samaria and to Africa. However, this inspired, historical narrative was not designed by the Holy Spirit simply to satisfy our curiosity about the history of the early church. Like all other parts of Holy Scripture, this historical narrative was written to give us spiritual instruction in the gospel of Christ. Five lessons taught in the first twenty-five verses of this chapter demand the attention of all who are concerned for their immortal souls, the souls of perishing sinners, and the glory of God.

First, THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST IS AN OFFENSE TO MEN (verses 1–4). This is a lesson often repeated in the Book of Acts. We need to be frequently reminded of it. The offense of the cross has not ceased (Galatians 5:11). To those who believe not, the cross (the doctrine of free justification through Christ, the sinner's Substitute) is not only foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:21–25), it is an aggravating offense that stirs up the wrath of man. Any man, any church, and group of men who faithfully preach RUIN BY THE FALL (The total depravity of the whole human race), REDEMPTION BY THE BLOOD (The effectual atonement of Christ for the sins of his people), and REGENERATION BY THE HOLY SPIRIT (Life and faith in Christ as gifts of God's sovereign, irresistible grace), will meet with relentless opposition from lost, religious men.

Secondly, THE LORD OUR GOD HAS A PEOPLE WHOM HE WILL SAVE (verses 5–12). The gospel of Christ has never been popularly received by men. It has always been in the minority. Human opinion and religious tradition have always been opposed to the message of God's free and sovereign grace in Christ. Most people who hear the gospel preached in the power of the Holy Spirit go on to Hell as though they had never heard the message of redeeming blood and saving grace. But the purpose of God is not frustrated. God has a people whom he will save (Romans 3:3–4; Acts 18:10). His elect are scattered among all nations and through all generations; but they shall be saved. God will gather his own to himself (Jeremiah 32:37–40). Not one of God's elect shall perish. Not one of those redeemed by Christ shall be lost in the end (John 6:37–40).

Thirdly, GOD ALWAYS CAUSES THE SINNER HE HAS PURPOSED TO SAVE TO HEAR THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST (v. 4). The preaching of the gospel is, in the purpose of God, as necessary for the salvation of sinners as election, redemption, and regeneration (Romans 10:13–17; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23–25). By the wondrous, mysterious workings of providence God always brings his elect to hear the gospel at his appointed time. He rules and overrules all things for the salvation of his chosen (John 17:2). He even allows reprobate men to persecute and scatter his church that they may be forced to carry the word of grace to chosen, redeemed sinners!

Fourthly, ALL SUPERNATURAL, APOSTOLIC GIFTS CEASED WITH THE APOSTLES (verses 14–17). Though Philip had received and exercised the miraculous gifts of the Spirit (v. 6–7), he was not able to communicate them to anyone. Only the Apostles could communicate the gifts of the Spirit to others. If no one but an apostle could communicate these gifts to men, (No one else ever did!), then the gifts must have ceased once the apostles had all died. When the gifts were no longer needed they ceased to be. They were needed to prove the credibility of the apostles as the messengers of Christ (Hebrews 2:3–4). But since we now have the complete, perfect Revelation of God, (the Bible), there is no need for the imperfect, temporary signs the apostles possessed (1 Corinthians 13:10; 2 Peter 1:19–21).

Fifthly, WHEREVER THE GOSPEL IS PREACHED BOTH TRUE BELIEVERS AND CARNAL PROFESSORS OF FAITH WILL BE FOUND (verses 12, 13, 20, 21). Every church is a mixed multitude of true believers and false professors. Wherever Christ plants wheat, Satan plants tares (Matthew 13:24–30). Wherever the Lord gathers his sheep, Satan gathers some goats. Along with those who were truly born again by the Spirit of God, Simon Magus professed to believe. But of him Peter said, "You have neither part nor lot in this matter: for your heart is not right in the sight of God." Simon believed the same doctrine the others believed. He was baptized like the rest. He certainly saw and recognized the power of the Holy Spirit. But Simon had one fatal deficiency. His heart was false! His heart was not right in the sight of God. He was a hypocrite at heart. By profession he was a believer, but at heart he was an infidel.

Is your heart right in the sight of God? It is not enough that we believe the truth, worship God in the correct manner, and obey his commands. Our faith, worship, and obedience must arise from a true heart, a heart that is right in the sight of God. The Puritan, Thomas Manton, once said, "Though you pray with the Pharisee, pay your vows with the harlot, kiss Christ with Judas, offer sacrifice with Cain, fast with Jezebel, sell your inheritance to give to the poor with Ananias and Sapphira, all is vain without the heart, for it is the heart that enlivens all our duties."

First and foremost God requires our hearts (Proverbs 23:26; 4:23). Christianity is a religion of the heart. It is a heart union with the Son of God. Man by nature is content with an outward form of religion: doctrinal knowledge, a moral code, works of righteousness, ritualism, ceremonialism, and emotionalism. But God requires heart worship and heart obedience. The state of a person's soul depends upon the condition of his heart (Proverbs 23:7). God looks not at our religious works, but at our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7; Proverbs 21:2). He "weighs the spirits." He says, "I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins" (Jeremiah 17:10). We may give God a bowed head, a serious look, a strict adherence to religious duty, faithful attendance at the house of worship, and a firm commitment to doctrinal truth, but until we give him our hearts our religion is an abomination to him (Isaiah 1:10–15; 66:2–3; Luke 16:15).

Salvation is a heart work (Psalm 51:17). It is "Christ in you the hope of glory." All those things spoken of as essential to salvation are matters of the heart: Conviction (Acts 2:37), Repentance (Luke 13:3), and Faith (Acts 8:37). But all men and women by nature have an evil heart of unbelief, departing from the living God (Ecclesiastes 9:3; Jeremiah 17:9; Genesis 6:5; Matthew 15:19). The one common way the Holy Spirit identifies the heart of men is by calling it "a stony heart" (Ezekiel 11:19). "A stony heart" is a hard, cold, barren, dead heart.

Only God the Holy Spirit can make a man's heart right in the sight of God. Only he can open the heart. Only he can reveal Christ in the heart. Only he can create in you a new heart. David was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), because God had given him—A new heart (Ezekiel 36:26; 2 Corinthians 5:17)—A broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17)—A heart of faith in Christ (2 Samuel 23:5; Romans 10:10)—A praying heart (2 Samuel 7:27)—A heart of gratitude and love for Christ (Psalm 34:1–10). A heart that is right in the sight of God is a heart in which there is a constant warfare with sin (Psalm 73; Galatians 5:17; Romans 7:14–24); but it is a heart that honors God and seeks his glory above everything else (Psalm 51:1–4; 40:16).

24. FIVE GOSPEL TRUTHS ILLUSTRATED

Acts 8:26–40

Gospel doctrine is vital. It must be preached and taught with clarity and distinctiveness. Many boast of their dislike of doctrine and appear to be utterly ignorant of it. God's people rejoice in the truth. Those who are ignorant of gospel doctrine are ignorant of Christ. They have no saving faith in him. An unknown God cannot be trusted. And the only way anyone can know and trust Christ is if they are taught his doctrine (Romans 10:13–17).

As gospel doctrine is essential to the saving of sinners, so too it is essential for the edification and comfort of God's saints (Ephesians 4:11–16). It is by faithful instruction in the doctrine of Christ that God's elect are built up and established in the faith.

Every true gospel preacher is a doctrinal preacher. The man who does not preach the doctrine of Christ does not preach Christ. Christ and his doctrine cannot be separated. The man who does not preach the doctrine of the gospel does not preach the gospel. The two cannot be separated. Any preacher who does not expound the doctrine of Christ to his hearers is like a lamp without a light bulb—He may be nice to look at, but he is utterly useless!

Yet, doctrine must have a personal application. Dead, dry, impersonal, unapplied doctrine is as useless as the words of those who preach nothing but the morals of vain philosophy. In the passage before us, Luke gives us five glorious, gospel doctrines by illustration. After the revival at Samaria broke out, the angel of the Lord directed Philip to go "toward the south unto the way that goes down from Jerusalem unto Gaza."

There he met an Ethiopian eunuch returning from Jerusalem. After preaching the gospel to him the eunuch declared his faith in Christ and Philip baptized him.

The first thing illustrated in this passage is THE WISDOM, GOODNESS, AND PERFECTION OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE (verses 26–28). Providence is God's sovereign rule of the world, his gracious accomplishment of his eternal purpose of grace for the good of his elect and the glory of his name (Romans 8:28). God's providence is always mysterious, indiscernible and unexplainable by man's wisdom. But it is always wise and good. All things are perfectly arranged by God, according to his schedule. By God's arrangement, everything in the universe is connected and all the connections are on time. With God, nothing is late and nothing is early. This is beautifully illustrated here.

There were two roads going down to Gaza from Jerusalem. One was commonly traveled. The other was seldom traveled, because it was a lonely, deserted road, going through the desert mountains. The angel of the Lord told Philip to take that road. "And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia," a man chosen of God came riding by! He had been in Jerusalem worshiping God. He was a Jewish proselyte, walking in the light God had given him, but lost. He came away from Jerusalem as empty as he had gone there. While at Jerusalem, no doubt, he had heard much about Jesus of Nazareth and the great stir caused by his followers. He may have been warned by the sanhedrin to stay away from the apostles. But the time of love and grace had come for him (Ezekiel 16:8). He must now be saved. So God sent Philip to meet him. At the time appointed by God, he brought Philip and the eunuch together.

Secondly, this passage demonstrates the fact that GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE OF GRACE IN SOVEREIGN ELECTION MUST AND SHALL BE FULFILLED. Before the world began God chose a people for himself, whom he determined to save. Everyone of those elect sinners will, in God's time and by God's power, be brought to Christ in saving faith (Psalm 65:4; 110:3; Ephesians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). God passed by the scribes and pharisees, the natural descendants of Abraham, and called a despised black man, an Ethiopian eunuch (Psalm 68:31; Isaiah 56:4–5). Grace always works the same way (1 Corinthians 1:26–31).

Thirdly, the Spirit of God sets before us a picture of TRUE EVANGELISM IN PRACTICE (verses 29–35). True evangelism arises from a firm faith in the efficacy of God's election, Christ's atonement, and the Spirit's call (Acts 18:9–11). It is a work performed by the direction of God the Holy Spirit. Three things always characterize true evangelism:

1. A GOD SENT PREACHER—Philip was the man chosen of God to be the messenger of grace to the Ethiopian eunuch. He was sent of God on an errand of mercy (Romans 10:15). The man God chose to use was a man full of the Holy Spirit, of blameless character, and committed to the gospel of Christ (Acts 6:3, 5; 1 Timothy 3:1–7). He was a man willing to serve God and his church in any capacity. Philip was willing to serve as a deacon. He was willing to go to Samaria and preach there. And he was wiling to walk for miles to preach the gospel to one Ethiopian. He wanted only to serve the cause of Christ. It mattered not to him where or how God used him. He just wanted to be used of God.

2. A GOD ORDAINED MESSAGE—Every man sent of God to preach to anyone is sent with the message Philip carried to the eunuch. Philip preached Christ to him (v. 35). God's servants have nothing else to preach (1 Corinthians 2:2). Christ crucified is "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27; Luke 24:27, 44–46). If God sends a man to preach, he sends him to preach Christ in all the Scriptures.

3. A SINNER CHOSEN OF GO—This Ethiopian eunuch was saved because God had chosen him (Acts 13:48; John 15:16). He is a picture of the kind of people to whom God is always gracious. He sought the Lord earnestly (Jeremiah 29:12–14). He walked in the light God gave him. He searched the Scriptures (John 5:39). And he was willing to be taught. Grace chose him. Grace prepared him for grace. And grace brought him to Christ in faith.

Fourthly, this eunuch is set before us as an example of THE SAVING FAITH OF GOD'S ELECT (verses 36–37). True, saving faith is more than a notion received in the head. It is heart knowledge, heart persuasion, and heart commitment to Christ (Romans 10:9–13; 2 Timothy 1:12). This eunuch declared that he believed with all his heart "that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." That means he is the One of whom the prophets speak, the Savior typified in the law and promised by God, and that he is God in human flesh who died for sinners and rose again (1 John 5:1).

Fifthly, this passage of Scripture illustrates THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BELIEVER'S BAPTISM (verses 36–39). Clearly, baptism is for believers only. It is a test of submission and obedience to Christ as Lord. It is the believer's symbolic confession of faith in Christ (Romans 6:4–6). And baptism is by immersion only. Immersion is not a mode of baptism. Immersion is baptism! Commenting on this passage John Calvin wrote, "Hence we see what was the manner of baptizing with the ancients, for they plunged the whole body into water."

When the day was over the eunuch "went on his way rejoicing." He continued to follow his ordinary course of life; but now he lived by faith and lived for the glory of God. Philip went on his way too, preaching the gospel as he was led of the Spirit, until he finally settled in Caesarea (Acts 21:8).

25. SAUL'S CONVERSION—AN EXAMPLE OF GRACE

Acts 9:1–22

The story of Saul's conversion is recorded three times in the Book of Acts, twice in his own words (22:4–16; 26:9–19), and once here in Luke's words. This man's conversion is described in great detail by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, because the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is a pattern, or example, of all true conversions (1 Timothy 1:12–16).

People commonly talk about Saul's Damascus Road experience as though it was a rare, exceptional thing, but that is not the case at all. Without question, the physical things Saul experienced that day were exceptional. The brilliant light and audible voice from Heaven, to my knowledge, have not accompanied any other person's conversion. However, Saul's spiritual experiences on the Damascus Road were not uncommon at all. In fact, all who are truly converted by the grace of God experience the very same things Saul did, essentially.

Salvation is not an experience, but a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 2:30). We must not look to our experience as the basis of faith and assurance before God. We look to Christ alone, trusting his blood, his righteousness, his intercession, and the power of his grace for the salvation of our souls. Christ alone is our Savior! Christ alone is the Object of our faith! Yet, salvation is something people experience. No one has the grace of God in his heart who does not experience the workings of grace in his heart. (Salvation is a work of grace—Ephesians 2:8–9). Taking Saul's conversion as our example, we see that there are five distinct acts of grace by which all who are saved have been brought to repentance and faith in Christ (Psalm 65:4).

1. A DIVINE ELECTION (v. 15)—No one has ever been saved, or ever will be, except those who are the objects of God's eternal, electing love (2 Thessalonians 2:13–14; Acts 13:48). God's operations of grace toward Saul did not begin on the Damascus Road, but long before. Saul was chosen to salvation before the world began (Ephesians 1:4–6). When God sent Ananias to preach to this newborn babe in grace, the very first thing he preached to him was election (Acts 22:13–14). Faith in Christ is not the cause of election, but it is the fruit and the proof of election (Acts 13:48; 2 Peter 1:10). When a sinner bows to Christ, trusting him as Savior and Lord, we say to him with confidence, "The God of our fathers has chosen you."

Election does not keep anyone from being saved, but guarantees that some people will be saved. Were there no election of grace, there would be no salvation (Romans 9:27–29). We would not and could not choose the Lord, but he chose us; and his choice of us made our choice of him certain (John 15:16). Election said, "Saul of Tarsus shall be saved." God's merciful decree said, "Saul will be saved at noon on the Damascus Road at the day appointed." Predestination drew the map by which Saul must travel to the appointed place of mercy. Providence led him along the predestined path to the place and hour when Christ must be revealed to him. "And it came to pass!"

2. A DIVINE REVELATION (v. 3; Galatians 1:15–16)—Though he was chosen of God, Saul could never be saved until he was made to "see that Just One" (Acts 22:14). So when it pleased God to reveal his Son in him, "suddenly there shined round about him a light from Heaven." He saw Christ and the glory of God in Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). He saw the same thing that Moses saw (Exodus 33:18–34:7). He saw that Just One of whom he had heard Stephen speak (Acts 7:52). He was made to see, by divine revelation, the glory of God in his absolute sovereignty, infinite grace and mercy, and inflexible justice, and he saw how that God can be both gracious and just in saving sinners by the substitutionary, blood atonement of that Just One, the Lord Jesus Christ (Psalm 85:9–11; Romans 3:24–26).

Salvation comes to sinners when they are given a revelation of Christ and the glory of God in him by the Spirit's effectual application of the gospel to their hearts. When a person sees Christ as he is and is reconciled to him in his true character he is saved.

3. A DIVINE CALL (verses 4–9)—There is a general call which men and women can and do resist (Matthew 20:16; 22:14). It goes forth indiscriminately to all who hear every time the gospel is preached. But there is an effectual call too. No one will ever be saved until he receives this effectual, irresistible call of the Holy Spirit by which helpless, totally depraved, spiritually dead sinners are brought to life and faith in Christ by the power of God (

John 5:25; Ephesians 2:1–4). Holy Scripture gives us numerous illustrations of this effectual call (Ezekiel 16:6–8; 37:1–14; John 11:43–44; 1 Corinthians 1:26–31). Saul was one of Christ's sheep. The time had come for the Good Shepherd to call his wandering sheep. When he calls, his sheep hear his voice and follow him (John 10:1–5, 27–29).

This call of the Spirit is called the effectual call because it gets the job done (Psalm 65:4; 110:3). It is a personal call (verses 4–5). Many were present, but only Saul was called. It is a convicting call (v. 5). The Lord convicted Saul of his sin with the words, "Why persecute you me?" It is a humbling call (v. 6). Saul "fell to the earth," submitting to the claims of Christ, his sovereign Lord. This call of the Spirit is also a distinguishing call (v. 7). The men who were with Saul saw a light, heard a voice, and were afraid. They knew something was going on, but not what. This call of grace separated and distinguished Saul from his companions (1 Corinthians 4:7). Again, the call of God is an awakening call (v. 6). Once he was called of God, Saul began to call upon God. Blinded now to all earthly concerns, he began to seek the Lord with an earnest heart.

For three days he was in suspense and darkness (verses 8–9). "He was all this time in the belly of Hell, suffering God's terrors for his sins, which were now set in order before him. He was in the dark concerning his own spiritual state, and was so wounded in spirit for sin that he could relish neither meat nor drink" (Matthew Henry).

4. A DIVINE ILLUMINATION (verses 17–18)—God sent a preacher to Saul who told him all the truth. Then the scales of darkness and ignorance, superstition and tradition fell off his eyes, and he received his sight. When Ananias instructed him in the way of faith (Isaiah 40:1–2), and he received his sight, what did he see? He saw Christ as his Substitute, God as his Father, and the Holy Spirit as his Comforter. He saw it to be his duty and his privilege to follow Christ in all things, beginning with believer's baptism, and he did it. The will of God became the rule of his life.

5. A DIVINE CONVERSION (verses 18–22)—Saul was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Grace converted him (Philippians 3:4–14). All that he once cherished he now renounced. His righteous deeds, his religious works, and his reputation as a Pharisee, he now counted to be but manure. He turned from religion to Christ. Grace turned him from a mere form of godliness to worship and serve the living God; and he was turned forever (Ecclesiastes 3:14). Immediately, he confessed Christ in believer's baptism (Romans 6:4–6), identified himself with the despised people of God and the gospel of his grace, and became a faithful witness of Christ. He laid down his life in the cause of Christ. Grace had made him a new man (2 Corinthians 5:17). This is the way of God with men. This is the way God saves sinners: by election, revelation, calling, illumination, and conversion. He saves in this way so that man's salvation will be to the praise of the glory of his grace. It is this experience of grace that identifies who God's elect are (1 Thessalonians 1:4–10).

26. SAUL JOINS THE CHURCH

Acts 9:23–31

Immediately after his conversion Saul took a long, three year journey into Arabia (Galatians 1:16–17), which Luke does not mention. He did not go up to Jerusalem to receive instruction from the apostles there. Being chosen as an apostle, he had to be taught the gospel by direct revelation by Christ himself. Therefore, the Lord sent Saul into Arabia where he spent three years in school with Christ himself as his Teacher! While in Arabia he preached the gospel among the heathen. "And after many days were fulfilled," that is, after three years were ended, Saul returned to Damascus where "the Jews took counsel to kill him". This is where Luke was directed by the Holy Spirit to take up his narrative. In verse 23 Saul is back in Damascus three years after his conversion on the Damascus Road.

DANGER AT DAMASCUS (verses 23–25)—After God saved him, Saul stayed for a brief period of time in Damascus, preaching Christ in the synagogues. Then he went to Arabia for three years, as just stated. Now he is back in Damascus, preaching the gospel of Christ. There he was in grave danger. As soon as he returned "the Jews took counsel to kill him" (verses 23–24). Enraged by the gospel Saul preached, the Jews persuaded the governor in Damascus that he was a dangerous man, one that should be arrested and put to death (2 Corinthians 11:32). Thus, the Word of God by Ananias three years earlier began to be fulfilled, regarding the great things Saul would be required to suffer for Christ (Acts 9:16). "Where God gives great grace, he commonly exercises it with great trials" (Matthew Henry). This persecution of God's servant at Damascus is instructive.

All who follow Christ walk in a path of certain trouble, affliction, and sorrow. "In the world, you shall have tribulation (John 16:33). "Yes, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12). "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). There are none who are honored by God who are not reviled by the world. Reproach, slander, abuse, and scorn from men is the common lot of God's saints in this world (Matthew 5:10–12).

Frequently, the believer's greatest enemies are those who were once closest to him. A man's foes are often those of his own household when he follows Christ (Matthew 10:30). These men were Saul's neighbors, friends, and kinsmen. They once attended church together at the local synagogue. Saul had done nothing to arouse their malice, except trust Christ, follow Christ, and preach Christ. For that they tried to kill him!

The gospel of Christ, the message of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, is offensive to lost, self-righteous men and women (1 Corinthians 1:23–24; Galatians 5:11). It offends man's pride, because it declares the total depravity and utter inability of Adam's fallen race regarding all things spiritual (Ephesians 2:1–3; Romans 5:12). The gospel of Christ offends man's sense of supremacy and self-determination, because it declares the absolute, universal sovereignty of God (Romans 9:15–18). It offends man's wisdom, because it declares salvation to be through the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ alone (Romans 3:24–26; 1 Corinthians 1:21–31). And it offends man's self-righteousness, because it declares his works of righteousness to be but dung and filthy rags (Philippians 3:8; Isaiah 64:6) and makes salvation to be entirely the work of God's sovereign grace (Ephesians 2:8–9; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5–6).

But God is faithful! He graciously delivered Saul from his persecutors (verses 24–25). Saul "escaped out of their hands" by the good providence of God. The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptation. With every trial, he makes a way to escape, that we may be able to bear it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

DIFFICULTY AT JERUSALEM (verses 26–30)—When he fled from Damascus, Saul went to Jerusalem. He had escaped his persecutors only to find difficulty among God's saints! They did not persecute him, but neither did they trust him. God's people are not without their faults. Sometimes true believers say and do things that hurt and hinder one another. They have no malicious designs against one another; but they are yet in this body of flesh and sometimes their fleshly nature is sadly evident.

When he arrived at Jerusalem Saul sought a place among the Lord's people (v. 26). His first concern was to find the congregation of God's saints. Where they were, he would be found. "He assayed to join himself unto the disciples." That means, Paul applied for membership in the local church at Jerusalem. He was not recruited by the church in a "membership drive". He asked for membership voluntarily. He loved Christ and his people and wanted to be identified with them.

"It is the duty and interest of every gracious soul to join himself to a church of Christ, which consists of the disciples of Christ, who have learned Christ and the way of life and salvation by him … To be joined to a church is to become an open subject of Christ's kingdom, a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem, one of the family of God, and a member of the body of Christ visibly" (John Gill).

At first the disciples were suspicious of Saul (v. 26). He was not offended by their error. He understood it and forgave it. He was a gracious man. Later, he gave us instruction about receiving brethren with baseless suspicions (Romans 14:1). Believers are to receive one another upon the basis of their profession of faith in Christ, as we would receive Christ himself. We are to treat one another as we would treat Christ, because every believer is truly one with Christ. After Barnabas recommended him, Saul was received into the church (v. 27). It is evident from this passage that only two things are to be regarded as qualifications for church membership: (1) Faith in Christ and (2) Believer's Baptism. Nowhere in the New Testament is anything more required or anything less accepted.

While at Jerusalem Saul gained reputation as a faithful servant of Christ (verses 28–30). He spent his time in the company of God's saints and faithfully bore witness to the Person and work of Christ. Yet, his bold confession of Christ stirred up the wrath of the Grecians. When they tried to kill him, Saul escaped out of Jerusalem and fled to Tarsus. Learn two things from this: (1). GOD'S SOVEREIGN PROVIDENCE OVERRULES EVEN THE WICKED DEEDS OF MEN IN THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF HIS PURPOSE (Psalm 76:10). By the wrath of these men God sent Saul to preach among the Gentiles (Acts 22:17–21). (2) GOD'S SERVANTS ARE SAFE UNTIL THEIR WORK IS DONE. "Mortals are immortal here until their work is done!"

DELIGHT IN THE CHURCHES (v. 31)—The churches of Christ had endured a long season of persecution. Then God saved the persecutor! The lion who once roared against God's little flock was made to lie down with the lambs. "Then the churches had rest; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, were multiplied." The churches of Christ will have times of trouble in this world; but our troubles will not last forever. Our God will make us triumphant in his time (

Matthew 16:18). During these days of relative rest the people of God should be more fully employed than ever in the furtherance of the gospel, as we walk in the fear of the Lord, enjoying the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

27. A MAN NAMED AENEAS AND A WOMAN NAMED DORCAS

Acts 9:32–43

Peter was on a preaching mission visiting the churches of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria which had been recently established as a result of the persecution at Jerusalem. He traveled from church to church preaching the gospel of Christ, establishing them in the faith of Christ and in the truth of God.

"THE SAINTS WHICH DWELT AT LYDDA" (v. 32)—Lydda was a town about 35 miles from Jerusalem in which God had been pleased to raise up a gospel church. It should be noticed that Luke and all the writers of the New Testament referred to all believers as saints. This title, "saints", is not a title of distinction reserved for a few very eminent believers. It is a title for all believers. Every person who is born of God is a saint. The word means "sanctified ones"! We were sanctified by God the Father in electing grace before the world began (Jude 1). He set us apart from the rest of mankind unto himself, for his own holy purposes and uses. We were sanctified by God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in redemption. By his substitutionary sacrifice at Calvary the Son of God made all of God's elect holy; and God the Father, looking on us through the blood of Christ declared us to be holy (Hebrews 10:10–14). This is our justification. Then God the Holy Spirit sanctified us in regeneration, giving us the holy nature of Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 3:5–9). All believers are saints because all have been sanctified. Their sanctification is the gift and work of God's free grace in Christ.

"A CERTAIN MAN NAMED AENEAS" (verses 33–35)—Aeneas' healing by Peter is given as a picture of God's saving grace in Christ. This man really was healed of his physical infirmity by the power of God; but his healing was intended by God both to confirm and to illustrate his saving grace. Everything about this man and his healing corresponds to and reflects the saving grace of God experienced by every child of God.

1. AENEAS WAS A CHOSEN OBJECT OF MERCY. Luke tells us that he was "a certain man". In those days it was common to find impotent beggars laid in conspicuous places, hoping for alms or other acts of mercy from those who passed by. Where one was found, many were likely to be found (John 5:1–9). No doubt there were many like Aeneas in Lydda, but AENEAS was chosen of God. Grace always comes to certain men and women, to certain ones chosen of God unto salvation (Ephesians 1:3–6; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14).

2. AENEAS WAS A HELPLESSLY SICK MAN. His disease was real. Peter was not a fake healer, but a real Apostle. He healed a man who really was in an utterly helpless condition. But AENEAS had not always been in such bad shape. So it is with us. God created man upright, in his own image (Genesis 1:26–28). But when Adam sinned against God we sinned in him and we died spiritually (Romans 5:12). All men and women since the fall of Adam are in a helpless condition of sin and death. We were all born in sin (Psalm 51:5).

3. THIS MAN KNEW SOMETHING ABOUT THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. By some means or other, he had heard about Christ. Otherwise, when Peter said, "Jesus Christ of Nazareth makes you whole," he would not and could not have believed on him (Romans 10:13–17). It is not necessary for a sinner to become a theologian to be saved, but it is necessary for him to know who Christ is and what he has done. It is not possible to trust an unrevealed, unknown Savior!

4. PETER'S WORD (GOD'S WORD BY PETER) CAME TO AENEAS' HEART WITH DIVINE POWER AND PERSONAL APPLICATION. Peter's word was the very word of God. God spoke to this man personally by the voice of another man, a gospel preacher. This is the way God calls sinners to Christ (John 10:1–5). "AENEAS, Jesus Christ makes you whole!" The effectual call of the Spirit (Psalm 65:4) comes to chosen sinners through the voice of gospel preachers. Sinners are saved, born again and called, by the Word of God (1 Peter 1:23–25).

5. AENEAS BELIEVED ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. He did not believe on Peter. He did not believe in the "power of his freewill". But he did believe that Jesus Christ had made him whole. He proved his faith by acting upon it. "He arose immediately!"

6. HE WAS MADE WHOLE IMMEDIATELY. But suppose he had not been. Suppose he had believed and yet was not healed. Peter would have been proved an impostor. Christ would have been shamefully dishonored. And the gospel Peter preached would have been proved a lie. The point I am making is this—It is impossible for a sinner to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and not be saved by him (John 6:37; Hebrews 7:25).

7. ONCE HE WAS HEALED, AENEAS ACTED LIKE A MAN WHO WAS MADE WHOLE. "He arose immediately!" He no longer laid upon his bed among his former companions. He had been made new (2 Corinthians 5:17). He went all over town telling people what Christ had done for him. It was obvious to everyone! Therefore, many "turned to the Lord."

DORCAS: A WOMAN FULL OF GOOD WORKS (verses 36–43). Dorcas is set before us as an example of faith and godliness. She was truly a woman who lived by faith and evidenced her faith by her works (Ephesians 2:8–10; James 2:14–26). She made it her business in life to "adorn the doctrine of God our Savior" (Titus 2:10). Luke tells us three things about Dorcas.

1. SHE EXEMPLIFIED THE GOSPEL BY HER DEEDS OF LOVE (verses 36, 39). Dorcas was not a preacher or a teacher. She held no public office in the church (1 Timothy 2:12). But she was gifted of God as a seamstress. And she used her gift in Christ like love and self-denial to make coats for God's poor saints. If I had to choose between the two, I would much rather live like Dorcas than preach like Peter (Philippians 2:1–8; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13).

2. SHE DIED IN FAITH (v. 37). We are not told what caused her death, or where she was when she died, only that she was sick and her sickness lead to her death. But she died in faith. Nothing else really matters! "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."

3. SHE WAS RAISED FROM THE DEAD FOR THE GLORY OF GOD (verses 38–43). Dorcas was raised from the dead to die again. We who believe on the Lord Jesus shall be raised to die no more (1 Corinthians 15:51–58). When Dorcas was raised from the dead God was glorified in Joppa. And when God's elect are raised from the dead in the last day, our God shall be glorified universally, forever (Rev. 5:9–13).

28. CORNELIUS—A MAN OF FAITH

Acts 10:1–48

Pride and racism are intolerable evils and must never be accepted by the church of God. All who are in Christ are one in him, be they rich or poor, black or white, male or female, learned or unlearned. All true believers are brothers and sisters in Christ (Colossians 3:11; Ephesians 2:11–18; 4:1–6). In Christ there are no distinctions of race, gender, or social class, and none should exist in us. This unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ was perhaps the most difficult obstacle for the early Jewish converts to overcome, and it remains a very difficult obstacle for many today. The Jews looked upon Gentiles as being unclean and had no dealings with them, except by necessity.

For four thousand years the revelation of God was restricted to the nation of Israel. The Jews alone had the light of divine truth. Then, because of their unbelief, after Christ came, God rejected the physical nation of Israel and sent his servants to preach the gospel in all nations that he might gather his elect from the four corners of the earth (Matthew 21:3–43; 23:37–38; 28:19). The apostle Peter was sent to preach the gospel to Cornelius, who was a Gentile, that he might be established in the faith of Christ. The lesson Peter had to learn, the lesson we all must learn is found in verse 34—"Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons." The grace of God is not dependent upon or limited by earthly, human distinctions (John 1:11–12; Romans 9:15). God has no regard for those things that separate and distinguish fallen men from one another.

Cornelius was a man of faith, a Gentile in whom the grace of God was evident. He had been converted from paganism to the faith of God's elect. He worshiped God according to the law of Moses. But he was ignorant of the fact that Christ had come and fulfilled the law as the sinner's Substitute. He believed God (verses 1–2). He saw Christ pictured in the types and shadows of the law. He trusted Christ as he was set forth in the prophets. But he had not yet learned that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of God. Therefore, God sent Peter with the good news of the gospel, telling Cornelius that the Savior for whom he was looking had come and accomplished redemption. Like Simeon, he waited for the coming of Christ in faith, not knowing that Christ had come (Luke 2:25–32). Cornelius was a man in whom all the characteristics of saving faith were evident.

HE WAS A MAN WHO FEARED GOD (verses 1–2). When the Holy Spirit tells us that Cornelius "feared God", he is telling us that he was a saved man, a child of God, a regenerate soul. Those who have the fear of God established in their hearts are saved. The Word of God holds out a multitude of promises to those who fear him. The Lord takes pleasure in them that fear him (Psalm 147:11). Those who fear God are accepted by him (Acts 10:34–35). "The Lord pities them that fear him" (Psalm 103:13). "The eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him" (Psalm 33:18). God's hand is open to and ready to feed them that fear him. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him" (Psalm 25:14). God remembers those who fear him and comes to them (Malachi 3:16; 4:2). Salvation belongs to those who fear the Lord (Psalm 85:9). Indeed, all the goodness and blessedness God has laid up for his elect in Heaven belongs to all who fear him as Cornelius did (

Psalm 31:19). The fear of faith is not a slavish, legal fear, but a loving, gracious reverence for the Lord God.

CORNELIUS WAS A CHARITABLE AND GENEROUS MAN (v. 2). Faith that causes a person to fear God also creates in him a loving, generous spirit toward his fellow man. Cornelius "gave much alms to the people," because he feared God. Faith produces and works by love (Galatians 5:6), and love shows itself by acts of kindness (1 Corinthians 13:1–8).

HE WAS A MAN OF EARNEST PRAYER (v. 2). His religion was not a nominal form of worship. Cornelius was earnest. He sought the Lord with all his heart (Jeremiah 29:12–14). He did so by making diligent use of the outward means of worship. At the hour of prayer he was in prayer. At the time of sacrifice he was found in the outer court of the temple. He "prayed to God always." (See. 1 Thessalonians 5:16). That means he lived by faith in dependence upon the Lord God. He sought the will of God in all things. Cornelius was a child of light. He walked in the light God had given him (1 John 1:7), and God gave him more light.

ONCE IT WAS MADE KNOWN TO HIM CORNELIUS WAS IMMEDIATELY OBEDIENT TO THE WILL OF GOD (verses 3–23). In Old Testament times the Angel of the Lord ministered to people in much the same way as God the Holy Spirit does today. He appeared to Cornelius when he was engaged in prayer and assured him of his acceptance with God (verses 3–4). Like Enoch, he pleased God by faith in Christ (Hebrews 11:6). "The prayers which he had put up in faith, and the charitable actions he had performed from a principle of love, ascended to God with acceptance" (John Gill). Then the Angel of the Lord showed Cornelius where he could find a messenger from God for his soul. And Cornelius sought him out (verses 5–08). In the meantime, God graciously prepared Peter's heart to minister effectively to his beloved people at Caesarea (verses 9–23). Cornelius needed a word from God. So he sought it by earnest prayer. Peter needed the help of God to preach the gospel. So he sought it by earnest prayer. And both men got what they needed from the Lord.

THIS MAN, CORNELIUS, RECEIVED GOD'S MESSENGER WITH REVERENCE AND SUBMISSION (verses 24–33). He was anxious to hear what God would say by the voice of his servant. Knowing that God spoke to men by Peter, he gathered his family and friends to hear the Word of God. And he held God's servant in high esteem. He erred in giving too much reverence to Peter (verses 25). But his attitude was right (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; Hebrews 13:7, 17). When reproved, Cornelius submitted (v. 26). He even overlooked the sinful faults of God's messenger (verses 27–28). He was determined to let nothing keep him from hearing what God had to say! When he listened to Peter preach, Cornelius expected to hear from God (v. 33), and he did!

HE BELIEVED THE WORD OF GOD (verses 34–43). He believed what God taught him by his servant Peter: (1) That no man has any claim upon the grace of God (verses 34–35), (2) That Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of God (verses 36–40), and (3) That the Lord Jesus Christ is the exalted sovereign of the universe (verses 42–43).

CORNELIUS' FAITH IS ALSO SEEN IN HIS OBEDIENCE TO THE ORDINANCE OF CHRIST (verses 44–48). The Spirit of God fell upon these Gentile believers, showing Peter and the brethren from Joppa that all believers, Jews and Gentiles, are one in Christ (verses 44–47); 1 Corinthians 10:16–17). And all who believed were baptized, symbolically confessing their death, burial, and resurrection with Christ (Romans 6:4–6).

29. PREACHERS AND THEIR HEARERS

Acts 10:1–48

It is not surprising to read that, while Peter preached the gospel to Cornelius and his friends, "The Holy Spirit fell upon them which heard the word" (v. 44). Such a marvelous manifestation of God's grace may be reasonably expected when men and women come to hear the Word of God with the attitude Cornelius and his friends had when they assembled to hear Peter. (Read verses 30–33). When preachers faithfully proclaim the gospel of the grace of God and those who hear them receive the Word of God with reverent, submissive, obedient faith, the blessings of God's grace are very likely to accompany the ministry of the Word. In this study, I will use both Peter and Cornelius as examples, showing us what should be reasonably expected both from preachers and their hearers.

WHAT SHOULD A PERSON'S ATTITUDE BE TOWARD THOSE WHO FAITHFULLY PREACH THE GOSPEL? Generally, people run to one of two extremes in their attitudes toward gospel preachers. Some hold them in contempt, despising them, ignoring them, or even opposing them, as the Judaizers at Galatia did Paul (Galatians 4:16). Others put preachers on a pedestal, as though they are to be adored and blindly followed, like Cornelius was ready to do with Peter (verses 25–26). Both these extremes are evil. Those who faithfully preach the gospel of Christ are only men. Therefore, they must not be adored and followed blindly. But every faithful gospel preacher is God's man. Therefore, he is not to be despised, ignored, or treated with contempt. The servant of God is to be known, loved, and highly esteemed by those to whom he ministers (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13). He is to be generously provided for by those who receive the benefit of his instruction (Galatians 5:6; 1 Corinthians 9:7–14; 1 Timothy 5:17–18). And believers ought to remember their pastors in prayer, follow both their doctrine and their example, and obey the messages they deliver as God's servants (Hebrews 13:7, 17, 18).

WHAT DID CORNELIUS AND HIS FRIENDS EXPECT FROM PETER? Cornelius had received a special revelation from God, showing him that Peter was ordained of God to be his instructor in the way of life and faith in Christ (verses 5, 6, 32). Therefore, he regarded Peter as God's ambassador. He expected to hear from Peter all that God had commanded him to declare (2 Corinthians 5:18–21).

Every faithful servant of God should be held in this high esteem by God's saints (1 Corinthians 4:1–2). God's preachers today (pastors, elders, evangelists, and missionaries) are not prophets or apostles. They do not possess prophetic or apostolic gifts. But they are God's ambassadors to eternity bound sinners. They are sent to proclaim the same message to all men that Peter was sent to proclaim to Cornelius—justification and peace, remission and forgiveness of sins through Christ, who is Lord of all (verses 36, 43; Hebrews 7:25). They are sent to preach Jesus Christ the Lord in his substitutionary redemption, sovereign reign, and saving power.

You have a right to expect from every man who claims to be a gospel preacher the same thing Cornelius expected from Peter (v. 33). Those who preach the gospel must be men of utmost fidelity to the Word of God and to the souls of men. They must keep back nothing that is profitable, but faithfully declare all the counsel of God (Acts 20:28). God's express command is, "He that has my word, let him speak it faithfully" (Jeremiah 23:28). Three things must characterize every gospel preacher. You should expect and require these three things of any man who ministers to your soul. The preacher must be …

1. A man who knows the gospel (1 John 1:1–3).

2. A man who preaches the gospel faithfully, regardless of cost or consequence (1 Corinthians 9:16; Ezekiel 33:7–8).

3. A man whose conduct is consistent with the gospel (1 Timothy 3:1–7; 4:12–16; 2 Timothy 4:1–5).

WHAT DID PETER FIND IN THE ASSEMBLY AT CAESAREA? Here are four things Peter found among Cornelius and his friends which every gospel preacher might reasonably expect to find among God's saints, when he comes before them to expound the Holy Scriptures.

1. Peter found in Cornelius a man who was truly concerned for the souls of men (v. 24). Cornelius knew some people who were perishing. He knew where they could hear the gospel. And he put forth considerable effort, time, and expense to get those people under the sound of the gospel. Surely, it is reasonable to expect all who fear God to behave in the same way.

2. Those men and women were gathered in the appointed place of worship, at the appointed hour with reverence, as in the presence of God to hear the Word of God, expecting to hear God speak to them by his servant (v. 33). Like the young child Samuel in the temple, they came to the house of God saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears" (1 Samuel 3:9). Many do not hear from God when his servant preaches simply because they do not come to the house of God seeking a Word from God.

3. Peter found in this band of people a readiness to receive the Word of God with meekness. Not one of them arrived late (v. 33). As far as they were concerned nothing was so important as the hearing of the gospel. They readily received God's message (Isaiah 66:1–2). They did not try to mold God's message to their way of thinking. They molded their thoughts to the Word of God.

4. The congregation at Caesarea was willingly determined to obey God. What God said, they immediately believed. What God required, they immediately gave. What God commanded, they immediately did. They submitted to Christ as Lord of all, trusted Christ for the remission of sins, and confessed Christ in believer's baptism. These men and women did not merely acknowledge the truth of the Word of God. They took it as their only rule of faith and practice. They addicted themselves to it. We must do the same! Hold fast the truth of God (2 Timothy 1:8–13) and proclaim it everywhere (Matthew 28:18–20).

WHAT WAS THE RESULT OF THIS MEETING? Peter was faithful to God, his Word, and the souls of men. Cornelius and his friends received the Word gladly. The result was glorious! The Lord God graciously visited and poured out his Spirit upon the band of chosen sinners (verses 44–45).

Blessed is the man who has the privilege of hearing a man, like Peter, faithfully preach the gospel. And blessed is the preacher who ministers to such a congregation as Peter found in Cornelius' house. Wherever such preachers and such hearers are found God the Holy Spirit is present and shall be manifest!

30. "NOT SO, LORD"

Acts 10:9–16

The Lord God let down a sheet from Heaven "wherein were all manner of four footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord." Once more impetuous Peter made a terrible blunder. We must not be judgmental or censorious of him in his error. Who are we to put ourselves in the place of judgment over God's saints? (Read Romans 14:4). Few men are half the man Peter was. But he was a man, and his errors as a man are written in the Scriptures for our learning and admonition (Romans 15:4). I do not doubt that Peter meant well, though he did wrong. His words were not intended by him to suggest all the evil that others have seen in them. Still, his error was significant enough for the Lord God to rebuke him sharply (verses 15–16). The Lord God told Peter to do something and Peter said, "Not so, Lord!" The simple fact is—All God's people in this world have a constant struggle with sin, rebellion, and unbelief, because we all still live in the body of flesh. No believer is the servant of sin (Romans 6:17–18), but no believer lives without sin (1 John 1:8–10). Though redeemed by the blood of Christ, called by grace, and robed in righteousness, God's saints in this world are sinners still. Sin is mixed with and mars all we do. DAVID was a man after God's own heart, but he still had a great struggle with personal sin (Psalm 73:1–26). PAUL was perhaps the greatest of all the apostles, but his warfare with sin was real (Romans 7:14–24). PETER was a man who died for Christ, but he too was a sinner until he drew his last breath in this world. We would be wise to learn from his mistake.

THOUGH HE IS IN CHRIST, THE BELIEVER STILL BEARS THE IMAGE OF ADAM. Though we have a new nature created in us by the work of God the Holy Spirit in regeneration, the old nature has not been eradicated. Though Christ lives in us and reigns in our hearts as King, old man Adam still lives in us. He has been nailed to the tree and crucified, but he is a long time dying and struggles hard to gain supremacy. Believers are new men in Christ, but we are still men and sin dwells in us. We are saved sinners, redeemed sinners, sanctified sinners, forgiven sinners, but we are all sinners still! As it was with Peter, so it is with every believer—Our struggle with sin is both real and constant (Galatians 5:17).

Peter was saved by the grace of God, but he was still Peter. If I had never read this passage of Scripture and someone related the story to me, without telling me who had spoken so rashly to the Lord, I think I would have recognized that it was talking about Peter. Who else would have openly said, "Not so, Lord"? Yet, we are all very much like him. Though grace reigns in us, the beast of sin still rages in us. There is a new man created in us, but the old man is still there. The inclinations to evil are not dead. We will, each of us, have to struggle with the peculiar weakness of our old nature for as long as we live in this world. It is true, even among God's saints in this world, "The very best of men are only men at best."

This was not the first time Peter rebuked his Lord in ignorance (Mark 8:31–33). This was not the first time he impulsively refused his Master's command (John 13:8). We are all too much like Peter in this regard, saying, "Not so, Lord," foolishly imagining that we know better than God what ought to be! When we argue with God's providence, question his Word, or do not obey his will, we are saying, "Not so, Lord!" In our hearts we know that the Lord knows best. Yet, we often speak and act as if we know best! Neither was this the first time Peter flatly, almost arrogantly, contradicted his Lord (Matthew 26:31–35). Like other believers, Peter was redeemed, regenerated, and filled with the Spirit; and, at the same time, he was rash, impudent, impulsive, and sinful.

Yet, Peter did have his good points. Grace was evident in this feeble man's heart. Grace was the ruling principle in him. This is evident in the fact that Peter acknowledged his fault. Luke would not have known what happened in Joppa if Peter had not told him (Acts 11:4–9). Peter was rash, but he was real too. He was blunt, but he was bold. He was hasty, but he was honest. There was no cunning or craftiness about him.

What should we learn from these things?

1. A person may have many faults and yet be a true believer.

2. As our Lord was patient and longsuffering with Peter, and as he is with us, we ought to be patient and longsuffering with one another (Ephesians 4:32–5:1).

3. Though we are in Christ, we must guard against the evil tendencies of our old nature (Colossians 3:12–17; Romans 6:11–14). The flesh is never dormant!

THOUGH WE ARE SAVED BY THE GRACE OF GOD, OUR FLESH STILL REBELS AGAINST GRACE. Peter's "Not so, Lord," was the response of his flesh to the great principle of the gospel that God had just set before him—The total abolition of law worship. Peter had to learn that we are not under law but under grace (Romans 6:14–15), and it took him a while to learn it (Galatians 2:11–16).

Legalism is natural to man. Our flesh kicks against the glorious free grace of God in Christ. It is the spirit of legalism remaining in us that causes us to lose our assurance or gain it by the evil or good we do. It is the spirit of legalism that causes us to neglect our duties and responsibilities because of personal inadequacy (Is: Prayer, The Lord's Table, etc.). It is the spirit of legalism that sets up rules of life for others to live by, which God has not given in his Word. It is the spirit of legalism which tries to motivate believers with threats of punishment and promises of reward. It is the spirit of legalism that causes men to set themselves up as the judges of God's saints. When will men learn that Christ is the end of the law (Romans 10:4)? We are not under the law, but under grace! We are not slaves, but children in the house of God. God's elect are not lawless antinomians, but we are no longer debtors to the law to live after the law. Christ fulfilled the law for us, and we are free from the law!

Peter also had to learn that all men and women are equal before God (v. 34). God has no regard for those things that separate men and women from one another, and neither should we (James 2:1–9; Acts 17:26).

THOUGH WE ARE NEW CREATURES IN CHRIST, THE BELIEVER'S OLD NATURE SHOWS ITSELF IN MANY WAYS—By rebellion against gospel doctrine; by rebellion against revealed duty; by murmuring against God's providence; by proudly despising our place of service! Let us ever put off these things of the flesh and put on Christ!

So long as we are in this body of flesh we will have to struggle with sin. God will not eradicate, or even alter the evil tendencies of our flesh. Yet, though we are weak, fleshly, and sinful, GOD'S GRACE IS SUFFICIENT (2 Corinthians 12:3–9).

31. "GOD IS NO RESPECTER OF PERSONS"

Acts 10:34–35

"God is no respecter of persons." That means that in the disposition of his saving grace, God is totally sovereign, giving it freely to whom he will (Romans 9:15–16). Neither earthly condition, hereditary descent, nor outward circumstance secures God's grace, nor even makes one person more likely to be saved than another (John 1:11–13). Neither will those carnal considerations prohibit God's saving grace, nor make a person less likely to be saved (1 Corinthians 1:26–29). God has no regard for those things that distinguish man from one another. His grace is not attracted by anything good in man. Neither is his grace repelled by anything evil in man.

AS GOD IS NO RESPECTER OF PERSONS, THERE IS NO PLACE IN THE CHURCH OF GOD FOR RESPECT TO MEN'S PERSONS. Our love, generosity, care, and fellowship must not be determined by a person's position, wealth, race, or social standing. We are not to court the rich or the poor. We must learn to treat all men alike. We all sprang from one common father, Adam (Acts 17:26). Had it not been for the sin and fall of our father Adam, all mankind would be one happy, loving family. Were it not for sin, we would have no divisions among us. It is sin that has produced pride, racism, and social snobbery. Because of the sin of one of Noah's sons, God divided all mankind into three races, and divided to each race its providential estate in this world (Genesis 9:18–27). But in Christ, and in the church of Christ, these distinctions of providence have no significance (Colossians 3:11; Ephesians 2:14–22). The sons and daughters of Shem, Ham, and Japheth are one in Christ. In Christ there is no such thing as Jew or Gentile, black or white, Oriental or European, male or female, bond or free, rich or poor, learned or unlearned. God gathers his elect from all races, all classes, all social orders, and all ages, and bestows his grace upon people from all walks of life as it pleases him (Rev. 5:9). This is the thing Peter had to learn and that we all must learn—"God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he who fears him and works righteousness, is accepted with him."

WHAT DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT MEAN WHEN HE SAYS BY PETER THAT "GOD IS NO RESPECTER OF PERSONS?" If interpreted in its context, like all other parts of Holy Scripture, this passage plainly asserts the freeness and sovereignty of God in the exercise of his grace. These words do not mean that God treats all men alike in providence and grace. "God's grace is him own, and he dispenses it according to his own sovereign will and pleasure" (Charles Simeon). God does distinguish between men (1 Corinthians 4:7), in election (2 Thessalonians 2:13), in redemption (John 10:11, 26), in providence (Romans 8:28), and in effectual calling (Matthew 22:14). God chose Isaac and rejected Ishmael. He loved Jacob and hated Esau. The fact is, God gives light and withholds light, gives grace and withholds grace entirely according to his sovereign will, without regard to man's person (

Matthew 11:20–26; Hebrews 2:16).

These words do not teach that salvation is by works. When Peter speaks of fearing God and working righteousness for acceptance with God, he is not teaching that men may gain divine favor by works of moral goodness. If salvation could be accomplished by human works of righteousness, then Christ died in vain (Galatians 2:21). If works contribute anything to salvation, then grace is altogether eliminated (Romans 11:6). Grace and works cannot exist together. They are opposed to one another. The one implies that salvation is paid to us as a debt. The other asserts that salvation is freely, gratuitously bestowed upon us as a gift. The Word of God plainly asserts that man's works have nothing to do with God's saving grace (Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:16; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5).

This text does not teach that as long as a person is sincere he will be saved, no matter what his religion is. All who are ignorant of Christ and the gospel of his grace are lost, perishing in their ignorance, without excuse (Romans 1:18–20). Cornelius was saved, accepted of God in Christ because he worshiped as he was supposed to at the time. Believing the Revelation God had given, he trusted Christ, of whom the law and the prophets spoke. There are none today in his peculiar circumstances. This man's character is not to be applied to religious men and women who deny the revelation of God in Holy Scripture.

The words of our text mean that God does not prefer or despise anyone because of his or her earthly conditions. The Jews thought they were the only people to whom God would ever be gracious. They regarded all Gentiles as dogs, cursed, and rejected of God. But Peter assures us here that all are alike before God. All people need God's saving grace (Romans 3:23). The grace of God comes to all the same way, through Christ the sinners' Substitute (Ephesians 1:3–6). All who are saved must come to God the same way, by faith in Christ (Acts 4:12). And all who come to God by faith in Christ are equally accepted in him. All are one with Christ. And all are one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). "Some lie nearer, others more remote from the sun, but they are all alike near to the Sun of Righteousness" (Thomas Manton).

WHO ARE THOSE THAT FEAR GOD AND WORK RIGHTEOUSNESS? Cornelius is described as a devout man who feared God and worked righteousness. But it is contrary to everything revealed in the Bible to imagine that his fear of God and works of righteousness were the foundation of his acceptance with God (Titus 3:4–5). The only people in the world who fear God and do works of righteousness are those who have been saved by the grace of God, accepted in Christ, washed in his blood and robed in his righteousness. These are the fruits of grace, not the causes of grace. The grace of God that brings salvation causes saved sinners to do works of righteousness (Ephesians 2:8–10; Titus 2:11–14). But grace does not come as the result of works!

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE ACCEPTED OF GOD? Peter speaks in our texts of sinners being "accepted with" God. The only way sinners can ever be accepted with God is in Christ (Ephesians 1:6). God accepts every gift given and every act performed for him by every believer through the merits of Christ (1 Peter 2:5). As he is pleased with Christ, so he is pleased with all who are in Christ by his grace (Matthew 17:5), because all that Christ has is ours in him by divine imputation. Hence, to be accepted with God means that it will be a righteous thing for God to reward every believer with all the blessedness of eternal glory in the day of judgment (Romans 8:17).

WHAT LESSONS ARE TO BE LEARNED FROM THIS TEXT AND FROM GOD'S DEALINGS WITH CORNELIUS? Without question, the Holy Spirit has recorded these things to teach us three very important lessons. (1) God's saving grace is absolutely free and sovereign. No earthly distinctions will secure God's favor, and no earthly woes will prevent it. (2) No one will ever seek the Lord in vain (Isaiah 45:19). Any who walk in the light God gives them will get more light. No one can put God under obligation. We can never merit anything from him, but wrath. Yet this is certain—All who truly seek the Lord find him (Jeremiah 29:13). (3) If God has no regard for anyone's person, neither should we. We must neither court the rich or despise the poor. We are to receive all as brothers and sisters in Christ who worship the Lord our God, and treat them as the children of God.

32. "HE COMMANDED US TO PREACH"

Acts 10:34–44

Peter was in Caesarea preaching the gospel to Cornelius and his friends. In verse 42 he declares why he was there. "He commanded us to preach unto the people." Before the Lord Jesus ascended back into Heaven he left his church, his apostles, and all who after them would serve him with a specific responsibility. "He commanded us to preach unto the people." That is the singular responsibility of every local church and of every servant of God (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:46–48; John 20:21–23; Acts 1:8).

The apostle Peter had many faults and failures. He was, like all other gospel preachers, only a man. Yet, he was faithful to the charge and responsibility God gave him. It mattered not where the Lord sent him, he went forth preaching the gospel. It mattered not who his hearers were, he preached the gospel to them. It mattered not what the results might be, Peter was a preacher, so he preached the gospel wherever God's providence opened the door. He was happy to preach to thousands in the temple, to the powerful Sanhedrin, or in the home of a Roman soldier who had gathered a few friends to hear the good news. What an example he sets before us!

The church of God must never lose sight of the purpose for her existence in this world (1 Timothy 3:15). The church is to be a sounding board for the gospel (1 Thessalonians 1:8), no more and no less. The church of this age has lost sight of her mission. That is why she is so weak and pathetic. The church of the living God is not a social club, an entertainment center, or a political force. The church of God is, by divine commission, a preaching center! The ministry of the church is preaching!

As preaching is the business of the church collectively, so preaching is the business of God's preachers specifically (2 Timothy 4:1–5). God's servants are not called to be counselors, psychologists, social workers, or religious promoters. God's servants are watchmen to warn of impending danger. They are preachers, men with a message from God for his people. It is the responsibility of every man who is called of God to preach the gospel to disentangle himself from the affairs of this world, and to give himself relentless to the business of preaching the gospel (1 Timothy 2:12–15).

All who are sent of God to preach the gospel preach the same thing. In the sermon described in our text Peter declared that he was preaching by divine commission; and God the Holy Spirit shows us what every God sent preacher preaches. Peter is here set before us as an example, or pattern of all true gospel preachers in three things.

1. He was sent of God. God himself put Peter into the ministry. God alone determined what he preached, where he preached, and when he preached.

2. He preached with divine authority. "Every true minister must speak because he is commanded to speak; he must speak what he is commanded to speak; and he must be prepared to fall back upon the authority of the Word of God continually" (C.H. Spurgeon). The preacher's doctrine must be the doctrine of God, plainly revealed in Holy Scripture (Isaiah 8:20).

3. His message was always the same in its essence. Peter preached the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ (Compare Acts 2:14–40; 3:11–26; 4:8–12). Jesus Christ himself is the theme of Holy Scripture and the theme of every sermon that is of God (Luke 24:44–47; John 1:45).

The mission of the church is preaching. The work of the preacher is preaching. But what is to be preached? What kind of preaching is both honoring to God and useful to the souls of eternity bound men and women? For the answer to those questions we need only to look into the Word of God and read the sermons of those apostles who preached with the inspiration and power of God the Holy Spirit. Acts 10:34–44 sets before us an example of apostolic preaching. By this standard all preaching, all preachers, and all churches must be judged to determine whether they follow the pattern of the New Testament.

APOSTOLIC PREACHING IS THE DECLARATION OF THE SOVEREIGNTY AND THE FREENESS OF DIVINE GRACE (verses 34–35). The grace of God is both sovereign and free. God is not gracious to sinners because of who they are, what they do, or what they have. God does not accept or reject anyone because of anything in them (John 1:11–13). He alone has determined to whom he will be gracious (Romans 9:15–18). Verse 35 describes the character of God's elect, not the cause of his saving grace. All who are born of God fear him, work righteousness, and are accepted by him through the merits of Christ, the sinners' Substitute.

NEW TESTAMENT PREACHING IS THE PROCLAMATION OF PEACE AND RECONCILIATION TO GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST (v. 36). The gospel is "the word of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:16–21). All people are by nature God's enemies. We must be reconciled to God and brought to terms of peace with him, or perish under his wrath. The only way peace can be obtained is by Jesus Christ. He obtained peace by his blood for all God's elect (Ephesians 2:14–15; Colossians 2:14–15). He offers peace to sinners in the gospel (Matthew 11:28–30). When he comes to sinners in saving power, the Prince of Peace brings peace (Romans 5:1; Colossians 1:20–21).

ALL WHO PREACH THE GOSPEL DECLARE THE ABSOLUTE LORDSHIP AND UNIVERSAL REIGN OF CHRIST. "He is Lord of all" (v. 36). God the Father has turned the universe over to the rule of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the God-man Mediator (John 17:2; Romans 14:9). As the reward of his finished work of redemption, the Lord Jesus Christ, as a Man, possesses universal dominion (

Isaiah 53:10–12), and exercises that dominion for the saving of his people. He is Lord of all men, all providence, all creation, and all events. The only way sinners can be saved is by bowing to his dominion as Lord (Luke 14:25–33). That is what faith is.

TO PREACH THE GOSPEL IS TO EXPOUND TO SINNERS THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR SAVIOR'S DEATH (verses 37–41). W. A. Criswell wrote, "When a man preaches the historical facts of Jesus, he is preaching Jesus. When he affirms the historical facts of the Christian faith, he is preaching the Christian faith. When he believes the historical facts of the Christian faith, he is believing the faith itself." That is the deadly error of this age! Preaching is not the declaration of facts, but of a Person. We exercise faith in a Person, not in facts. To preach the gospel is to declare the meaning of Christ's work. Peter explained to Cornelius the meaning of all the facts he had heard about Jesus of Nazareth, and affirmed his personal knowledge of the risen Christ (1 John 1:1–3).

GOSPEL PREACHING INVOLVES THE DECLARATION OF IMPENDING JUDGMENT (v. 42). "Hear the Word of God, and be persuaded of this, that Christ, whose gospel and word you hear, will judge you according unto it" (Matthew Poole). (See John 5:26–27; Acts 17:31; 2 Corinthians 5:10–11; 2 Timothy 4:1). In that great day, all who are saved will be justly saved through the merits of Christ, and all who are damned will be justly damned because of their own sin (Rev. 22:11).

TO PREACH THE GOSPEL IS TO DECLARE THE COMPLETE REMISSION OF SINS THROUGH JESUS CHRIST FOR ALL WHO BELIEVE (v. 43). God delights in mercy. Therefore, he pardons iniquity (Mic. 7:18). And he does so justly, through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 1:9).

These six things characterize the message of all true churches and preachers, and form the essence of every believer's testimony to men. But all our preaching and witnessing is vain unless God the Holy Spirit makes the word of grace effectual (v. 44).

33. PETER'S DEFENSE BEFORE HIS BRETHREN

Acts 11:1–18

God's servants always meet with opposition in the world. They expect it (John 15:20–21). The prophets of the Old Testament, and the apostles of the New, and faithful gospel preachers throughout the ages have constantly been the objects of mockery, derision, slander, and persecution. The message of the cross has always been offensive to men and still is. The doctrine of God's free and sovereign grace in Christ has never been approved of by the masses. The church of God has a message from God to deliver to men and women who are his enemies. We expect opposition from God's enemies. But in Acts 11:1–18 Peter is standing in the midst of his brethren at a church meeting, defending his ministry before people who should have rejoiced in it! He could handle opposition from the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Libertines easily enough. He expected it. But it must have been an astonishing, painful thing for him to meet with opposition in the church of Christ and defend himself before his own brethren.

Being led of God to do so, Peter went to Caesarea and preached the gospel to a congregation of uncircumcised Gentiles. Because they believed the message of grace and redemption through Christ, the sinners' Substitute, these Gentiles were baptized by Peter in the name of the Lord. When the Jewish believers heard about what Peter had done, instead of rejoicing in God's grace, they were hopping mad! In this passage Peter explains what God had done. The Holy Spirit has recorded this sad incident in the history of God's church to teach us several important lessons.

GOD'S PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD HAVE MANY FAULTS (verses 1–3). Here is a marvelous revelation of human nature. The church at Jerusalem was in an uproar, not because of some grave doctrinal error or sinful deed, but because Peter had eaten with Gentiles! The uproar was so great that later it caused Peter himself to err (Galatians 2:11–16). They ignored the facts that God's name was worshiped and honored at Caesarea, that this thing was done by God's direction, that the saving grace of God had reached many, and that God's mercy was going out to the whole world. Nothing was said about any of these things! They were ready to condemn Peter because he had been in the home of an uncircumcised Gentile and ate with him.

This church that was once "with one accord" and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, once so mightily used of God, was now ready to sit in judgment over God, his servant, and his work! It was filled with strife over nothing! By the time we get to the end of the chapter, God had reduced them to utter poverty, living on the charity of the Gentile believers they here derided (verses 27–30). This incident in the church at Jerusalem is recorded to warn us. We must carefully and constantly guard against the evil tendencies of our proud flesh toward harshness, slander, and division (Ephesians 4:1–7, 30–32; 5:1–2). Be very careful in your judgment (assessment) of your brother's actions (Matthew 7:1–5). Make allowances for and be lenient with one another. Grace teaches people to be gracious!

HUMAN NATURE WILL ALWAYS TRY TO MIX WORKS AND GRACE (verses 4–17). This was the real problem. These Jewish believers thought that uncircumcised Gentiles could not be accepted of God. The only way Peter could exonerate himself was to tell them exactly what had happened, exactly what God taught him in his vision at Joppa, and exactly how Cornelius and his band responded to the gospel, and say, "Brethren, God did this!"

The sad fact is, Judaizers, legalists have always plagued the church of God in this world. It is the natural tendency of proud human flesh to say, "Grace is not enough. God requires something from man." While declaring that salvation is by grace, they add law keeping, Sabbath observance, adherence to religious traditions and customs to the grace of God. In doing so, they destroy the doctrine of grace. Anything done by man, when added to Christ, or added to the grace of God, for justification, sanctification, or any other aspect of salvation, makes the blood of Christ and the grace of God to be of non-effect (Galatians 5:1–4).

Grace and works will not mix (Romans 11:6: Ephesians 2:8–10). Grace producers good works. But grace is not caused by, dependent upon, or even influenced by our works! All preachers of works salvation are enemies of God, of Christ, of the gospel, and of men's souls. They are to be held in utter contempt by the church of God (Galatians 1:6–8; 5:12; Philippians 3:2). God's gospel simply declares with regard to the whole work of salvation, "God did it!" God thought it! God bought it! God wrought it!

GOD'S PEOPLE, THOUGH THEY HAVE MANY FAULTS, SUBMIT TO AND RECEIVE SPIRITUAL INSTRUCTION. "When they heard these things, they held their peace and glorified God" (v. 18). Having been corrected, these brethren acknowledged their error and turned from it. True believers do err in many ways (1 John 1:8, 10). But believers do not hold the Word of God in contempt. Like David, when God confronts them with their sin, they bow to the Word of God (2 Samuel 11:26–12:24).

GOD'S SAVING GRACE ALWAYS PRODUCES GENUINE REPENTANCE (v. 18). Repentance, like faith, is a gift of God. It is not something men work up. It is not something that can be produced by human power and reason. Repentance is something God grants to sinners through Jesus Christ by the preaching of the gospel (Acts 5:31). Legal fear is not repentance; both Cain and Simon Magus had that. Moral reformation is not repentance; the Pharisees had that. Trembling at the Word of God is not repentance; Felix had that. Remorse for sin is not repentance; Judas had that. A desire for Heaven is not repentance; Esau had that. What is repentance? It involves at least these four things:

1. CONVICTION (John 16:8–14). No one will ever repent until he is convinced by the Spirit of God of his sin, Christ's righteousness, and God's judgment of sin by Christ's accomplished redemption.

2. CONVERSION (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Repentance is a turning of the heart to God, as he is revealed in Christ, in reconciliation and love.

3. COMMITMENT (Mark 8:34–38). There is no repentance toward God where there is no commitment to Christ as Lord.

4. CONTINUATION (Matthew 5:22). Every true penitent keeps on repenting, coming to Christ, following Christ, and consecrating himself to Christ. Like faith, true repentance never quits. It seeks Christ until it has Christ in the fullness, perfection, and joy of heavenly glory.

34. "THE DISCIPLES WERE CALLED CHRISTIANS"

Acts 11:19–30

Acts 11 is a turning point in the history of the early church. The church at Antioch, established under the ministry of Barnabas (verses 22–24), was the first gospel church to be established among the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas labored together in Antioch for about a year. During that time the church grew enormously. The church at Jerusalem was no longer the center of evangelism. When that church was on the decline, when the time had come for the gospel to be carried to the Gentile world, God raised up this church at Antioch. It took up the banner of gospel truth and held it high for five hundred years until the entire city was destroyed by an earthquake in 526. It was this church which sent out the first missionaries (Paul and Barnabas—Acts 13) to proclaim the gospel to the world. Before they were done, these two men carried the gospel to the entire civilized world. The events at Antioch recorded in these verses and the lessons here taught and illustrated by the Spirit of God may be summarized by four statements.

First, BY THE ARRANGEMENT OF HIS WISE AND GOOD PROVIDENCE GOD GRACIOUSLY CAUSED HIS ELECT TO HEAR THE GOSPEL AT THE TIME HE HAD APPOINTED WHEN HE WOULD SAVE THEM. God has a purpose in everything he does, and his purpose is always good. The Lord God sent persecution to his church at Jerusalem so that he might be gracious to his chosen among the Gentiles (Compare

Acts 8:1–4; 11:19; Romans 8:28). At the time of love God will cause his chosen ones to hear the gospel and believe (Ezekiel 16:8; Psalm 65:4).

These believers who were greatly afflicted by God's hand of providence were yet obedient to him. Though they were persecuted, they went everywhere "preaching the Lord Jesus" (v. 20). In the midst of trouble and sorrow they were faithful witnesses. Though they could not have understood the purpose of God in their trials, they did understand their responsibility and faithfully performed it. "And the hand of the Lord was with them" (v. 21). God never forsakes his own (Isaiah 41:10–14). Our heavenly Father does not always tell us what he is doing, but he assures us that all he is doing is for our good, the good of his elect in general, and his own glory. As the result of the persecution at Jerusalem the gospel was preached at Antioch, "and a great number believed and turned unto the Lord."

Second, THE LORD GAVE HIS CHURCH AT ANTIOCH PASTORS ACCORDING TO HIS HEART, WHO FED THE SAINTS WITH KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING (verses 22–26; Jeremiah 3:15). First, he sent Barnabas to them, "a good man," generous, charitable, and kind, "full of the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 4:18–21), and "full of faith". He believed God and had proven himself faithful to God. Barnabas served the church of God wherever he was needed, with everything he had, long before he was sent out to preach the gospel. He was not a novice, but a man of proven faithfulness. Let no man be sent into the work of the gospel ministry who has not been proven as a faithful man (1 Timothy 3:1–6; Titus 1:6–9). This faithful pastor rejoiced in the grace of God upon his people and "exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord" (v. 23). Then Barnabas went to Tarsus and persuaded Paul to come to Antioch to help him in the work. As stated before, they labored together as a pastoral team at Antioch for a full year (verses 25–26).

Third, THROUGH THE FAITHFUL MINISTRY OF THESE TWO GOSPEL PREACHERS GOD SAVED MANY, AS IT PLEASED HIM(verses 20, 21, 24). This is God's method of grace (Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23–25). God has a people in this world whom he will save: his elect, his redeemed! At the time appointed, God will cause his chosen to hear the gospel. And he will give them life, faith, and repentance through the preaching of the gospel, by the power of his Holy Spirit.

Fourth, "AND THE DISCIPLES WERE CALLED CHRISTIANS FIRST AT ANTIOCH" (verses 26–30). Until this time the Christian religion had been looked upon as a sect of Judaism, like the Pharisees and Sadducees. The early believers were Jews. They were circumcised. They lived among the Jews. They kept the Mosaic feasts, holy days, rituals, and ceremonies, and worshiped in the temple and in synagogues. The trappings of legal worship were not dropped, or destroyed all at once (Hebrews 8:13). But something new, something totally different happened at Antioch. These converts were not Jews, but Gentiles. They had no background in Judaism and no relationship to the Mosaic law. They had lived as pagans, idolaters, who engaged in the most godless, vile lifestyles imaginable. Among these people God was pleased to raise up a church. Vile Gentiles had been given repentance and faith in Christ. They became followers of Christ. And their pagan neighbors invented a new name to describe this strange group of people. They called them "Christians". What does that name mean? A Christian is a person, like Christ, anointed of God (1 John 2:27). As an Augustinian is one who follows Augustine, so a Christian is one who follows Christ. As a baker is one whose business is baking, so a Christian is one whose business is Christ. A Christian is a voluntary slave to Christ in his household.

There was something about the believers at Antioch which caused their neighbors and relatives to look upon them with scorn, and say with contempt and derision, "They are Christians!" What was it? What made these people so unique, so different? It was not their dress, their speech, their diet, or even their social life that made them peculiar. If we carefully study the usage of this word "Christian" here and the other two places where it is found in the Bible (Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16), six things will become obvious.

1. A Christian is a person who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the gospel (verses 20–21; Acts 26:28). Believing the gospel message, we trust ourselves to the hands of Christ. We believe the gospel; but we trust Christ alone for salvation, eternal life, and everlasting acceptance with God.

2. A Christian bows to Christ as his Lord and King (v. 21). Faith surrenders to the claims of Christ as Lord and willingly resigns to his rule (Luke 14:25–33).

3. A Christian is one who with purpose of heart cleaves unto the Lord (v. 23). Believers persevere in faith. They cling to Christ, saying, "Lord, to whom shall we go" (John 6:68). We have no other hope.

4. A Christian is one who assembles with God's people in the name of Christ (v. 26). Sheep are social creatures. Goats roam alone! Believers identify themselves with Christ and one another in baptism (Romans 6:4–6), gather together in worship (Hebrews 11:26), break bread in sweet communion (1 Corinthians 11:24–28), and are united in the cause of Christ.

5. A Christian is one who walks in love with his brethren (verses 27–30). God's people love each other. "He who loves not knows not God" (1 John 4:8; 5:1).

6. A Christian is one who patiently bears suffering and reproach for the glory of God (1 Peter 4:16). They follow the example of Christ even in the things they suffer (1 Peter 2:21).

35. A LESSON IN GIVING

Acts 11:28–30

Agabus the prophet informed the saints at Antioch that there was going to be a great famine in the world, "which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judea: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul." These children of God are held up by the Holy Spirit as examples to us. They exemplify the grace of giving.

They were informed by Agabus of a need and were moved by the Holy Spirit, speaking through Agabus, to do what they could to help their brethren in Judea (v. 28). Then they spontaneously determined, without any pressure but the pressure of love and grace in their hearts, to give for the relief of their Jewish brethren, people they had never met (v. 29).

The believers at Jerusalem had already sold their possessions and gave everything they had to support their brethren and to see that the gospel was preached throughout the world (Acts 4:34–37). Had it not been for the generosity of the believers at Jerusalem there would have been no believers at Antioch! Now the saints at Antioch, in gratitude to God and their brethren from whom they had received the gospel, determined in their hearts to help their brethren in Judea when the need arose. Every man resolved to give according to his own ability. Each person's giving was spontaneous, free, and unconstrained. Spontaneous giving is not careless giving. It is giving that is prompted by the Spirit of God, guided by the Word of God, and carried out with thoughtful determination and purpose of heart (2 Corinthians 9:7). By giving to meet the needs of their brethren, these saints at Antioch were following the example of Christ himself (Philippians 1:1–8; 2 Corinthians 8:7–9). Taking the Antioch believers as an example, I want to show you eight things plainly revealed in the Word of God about giving.

1. If we would give anything for the glory of God and the honor of Christ, OUR GIFTS MUST BE MOTIVATED BY LOVE AND GRATITUDE TOWARD THE LORD JESUS CHRIST (2 Corinthians 8:7–9).

The Apostle Paul refused to give any commandment about giving. He simply says that our giving is to be a proof or demonstration of our love for Christ. We prove the sincerity of our professed love to Christ by what we give and why we give it. In this dispensation of grace, God has given us no laws telling us how much we are to give. Like all other acts of worship, our gifts must be motivated by love. "The love of Christ constrains us!" Love for Christ is the key. Love is generous, overflowing, and sacrificial. Love sets its own guidelines. Love is a law unto itself. Love determines what the believer gives, how much he gives, and how often he gives.

2. If we would give as unto the Lord, OUR GIFTS MUST ARISE FROM A WILLING HEART (2 Corinthians 8:12).

That which is given out of a sense of duty, responsibility, debt, or legal constraint is not free. Only when our gifts come from willing hearts, only when they are given freely and cheerfully are they accepted by God. The quantity given is totally insignificant to the Lord. It is not the amount given, but the motive of the gift that matters (Exodus 35:4, 5, 29).

3. WE SHOULD ALL GIVE ACCORDING TO OUR ABILITY, IN PROPORTION TO OUR BLESSINGS (1 Corinthians 16:2).

Carnal men and religious legalists talk about percentages and specific amounts. But the New Testament never speaks of such things. Our gifts to the cause of Christ, the preaching of the gospel, and the poor among us are to be based upon our ability. God's people are not tax-payers (tithers), but sons! We do not owe ten percent of our income to the government of God's kingdom. God's kingdom, his church is our family. When we give, we are giving to meet the needs of our family. What miser will be stingy with his own family?

There should be an equality in giving too (2 Corinthians 8:13–14). A few people should not be expected to carry the load for all. Each should do what he has the ability to do in the support of Christ's kingdom. Yet, the poor should not be expected to carry the same load as the wealthy.

4. ALL GOD'S PEOPLE SHOULD GIVE FOR THE SUPPORT OF THE GOSPEL (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:7).

Men and women, rich and poor, old and young, all who believe the gospel should give a portion of their earthly goods for the support of the gospel. We should all be willing to share what we have for the common good of God's church.

5. If we would honor Christ in our giving, WE MUST BE BOTH LIBERAL AND SACRIFICIAL IN GIVING (2 Corinthians 9:5–6).

Believers are liberal and generous because they have been treated liberally and generously by God (Romans 5:21; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11). Giving is like sowing seed in the earth. A wise farmer sows his best seed and scatters it generously. That is the way we are to give (Galatians 6:6–10). We have given nothing until we have taken what we want, what we need, what we can use for ourselves, and have given it to our Lord (Mark 12:41–44).

6. ANY GIFT THAT IS ACCEPTED BY CHRIST AS AN ACT OF WORSHIP, FAITH, AND COMMITMENT TO HIM MUST BE VOLUNTARY (2 Corinthians 9:7).

The Word of God leaves it entirely up to you what you give, who you give it to, where you give, the way you give, and when you give. There is nothing legal about it. God's people are not in bondage. "God loves a cheerful giver!" He will not have legal gifts of a grudging spirit.

7. Whether our gifts are made in public offerings of worship, to private individuals, or to specific causes, WE ARE TO GIVE AS UNTO THE LORD (Matthew 6:1–5).

Do nothing to be seen of men or honored by men. That which is done unto the Lord, for the honor of God, will be seen and honored by him (Mark 14:3–9). In all acts of worship (prayer, giving, fasting, Bible reading, etc.) strive to maintain privacy. The minute you advertise what you do for Christ you expose a hypocrite's motive!

8. THIS KIND OF GIVING IS WELL-PLEASING TO GOD (Philippians 4:18; Hebrews 13:16).

Give out of a loving and grateful heart, hoping for nothing in return. Of these two things you may be assured: (A) You will never suffer loss by generosity (Luke 6:38). "The only way to have more than enough to spare is to give more than you can spare" (Oswald Smith). "Many a man becomes empty handed because he does not know the are of distribution" (C. H. Spurgeon). (Read Psalm 37:16–26). (B) The more you can be trusted with to use for the kingdom of God, the glory of Christ, and the furtherance of the gospel, the more you will have to use. If you are willing to give, God will supply you with the ability to give (2 Corinthians 9:10; Philippians 4:19).

36. THE GOOD PROVIDENCE OF OUR GOD

Acts 12:1–25

Nothing is more comforting and beneficial to believers than a clear understanding of and confidence in God's providence. "A firm faith in the universal providence of God is the solution of all earthly problems. It is almost equally true that a clear and full apprehension of the universal providence of God is the solution of most theological problems" (B. B. Warfield).

DIVINE PROVIDENCE is God's sovereign rule over all things. It is God's government of his creation. In providence God graciously and wisely brings to pass all that he purposed in eternity and all that he has promised in the Scriptures. Predestination (Romans 8:29–30; Ephesians 1:5, 11) is the sovereign, eternal purpose of God. Providence is the unfolding of that purpose in time. It is God's sovereign, absolute arrangement and disposal of all things for the eternal, spiritual good of his elect and the glory of his own great name (Romans 8:28; 11:36).

"ALL THINGS ARE OF GOD" (2 Corinthians 5:18). Learn that and you have learned the only thing that can sustain your heart in peace when your life is full of trouble. Faith in God's sovereign providence is the only antidote there is to anxiety and fear. "Happy is the man," wrote William Cowper, "who sees God employed in all the good and ill that checkers life."

Acts 12 exemplifies and illustrates God's wise, adorable, and good providence in a very instructive manner. Herod the king had killed James, the brother of John, and was about to kill Peter. But the angel of the Lord delivered Peter from Herod's sword. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate clearly the fact that God's providence wisely and graciously ruled in all the events recorded in these twenty-five verses. The death of James, the arrest of Peter, the prayers of the church, the deliverance of Peter by the angel, and the death of Herod were all the works of God's good providence. The events of this chapter demonstrate the glorious sovereignty of our God in all things (Psalm 115:3; 135:6; Isaiah 14:24; 45:7; 46:9–10; Daniel 4:34–37). This chapter is an illustration of Psalm 76:10, where it is written, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise you: the remainder of wrath shall you restrain."

DIVINE PROVIDENCE BROUGHT A TERRIBLY PAINFUL TRIAL UPON THE VERY PEOPLE WHO WERE THE OBJECTS OF GOD'S ETERNAL LOVE (verses 1–4). God sent famine throughout the world in the days of Claudius Caesar and Herod Agrippa began to persecute the church. It was his intention to destroy the body of Christ, just as his predecessor had tried to destroy Christ himself by murdering all the male babies in the land of Judah (Matthew 2:16). He had already killed James, the brother of John. That pleased the Jews so much that he had Peter arrested, planning to kill him after Easter, the Passover.

God's saints are not sheltered from trials and heartaches in this world. They suffer all the common trials of men. When the drought and famine came, it came upon both the righteous and the wicked. The fact is, as long as we live in this sin-cursed world we will suffer the consequences of sin, just like all other people. Believers as well as unbelievers get sick, endure sorrow, and die. Faith in Christ does not eliminate pain in life! In addition to the ordinary trials of life, believers suffer the reproach of the gospel for Christ's sake (Matthew 10:22; 24:9; Mark 13:13; Luke 21:17). It is not possible to faithfully confess Christ and the gospel of God's free and sovereign grace in him without incurring the wrath of those who hate him (John 16:33). The cross of Christ is offensive to men (Galatians 5:11).

The believer knows that his trials, whatever they are, are sent of God (Job 2:10). Nothing happens in this world except that which our God has decreed for the good of his people. Our God rules all things in this world, the elements of nature, the thoughts of men, and the deeds of all his creatures (Proverbs 16:1, 4, 9, 33; 21:1). Let every tried believer be assured of these five things:

1. God sent your trial (Romans 8:28).2. God will sustain you through your trial (1 Corinthians 10:13).3. God will be with you in your trial (Isaiah 41:10).4. God will bring your trial to a good end (1 Peter 1:7).5. God will get glory to himself through your trial (Romans 11:36).

THE TRIAL OF PROVIDENCE CAUSED GOD'S SAINTS TO SEEK HIM IN PRAYER (verses 5, 12). Our trials are ordained of God for many reasons. Just as fire purifies gold, the believer's trials have a sanctifying effect upon him. One blessed result of earthly woes is this: They cause believers to pour out their hearts to God in prayer (Psalm 107:1–31). When Peter was cast into prison "prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him."

"God in Israel sows the seeds of affliction, pain and toil;

These spring up and choke the weeds that would else o'erspread the soil;

Trials make the promise sweet; Trials give new life to prayer;

Trials bring me to His feet, lay me low, and keep me there."

FAITH IN GOD'S GOOD PROVIDENCE GAVE PETER CONFIDENCE, ASSURANCE, CONTENTMENT, AND PEACE IN THE MIDST OF GREAT ADVERSITY (v. 6). Peter was scheduled to be executed by a cruel tyrant, but he was peaceful, so peaceful that he slept soundly on the eve of his scheduled execution. He slept so soundly that the angel had to hit him on the side to wake him up. How could he have been so tranquil, so peaceful, so free of care? He believed God! Peter lived by faith. He knew three things which enabled him to sleep peacefully in the midst of great adversity: (1) He belonged to God. By election, redemption, and regeneration God had made Peter his. (2) He was in the hands of God. Peter was in the hands of God's care and his persecutors were in the hands of God's control. (3) God had promised to do him good. If the Lord delivered him, that would be good. He would go on serving his Master. If Herod killed him, that would be better. He would go to be with his Master (Romans 8:31; Psalm 56:3).

THE SAME HAND THAT DELIVERS GOD'S ELECT, DESTROYS HIS ENEMIES (verses 7, 23). The angel of the Lord was sent to deliver Peter and to destroy Herod. Both men were smitten by the same angel, but one was saved by him and the other slain. So it is with God's providence. God's providence toward his elect is all mercy. Toward those who believe not, it is all wrath (Psalm 92:1–15). The angels of God are messengers of mercy to serve and protect God's chosen sons and daughters (Hebrews 1:14). But to the reprobate they are messengers of wrath and executioners of justice (Matthew 13:41–42).

BECAUSE OUR GOD SOVEREIGNLY RULES ALL THINGS IN PROVIDENCE, WE ARE ASSURED THAT HIS PURPOSE OF GRACE SHALL BE ACCOMPLISHED (verses 24–25). Acts 12 begins with Herod fighting against God, trying to stop the spread of the gospel. It ends with Herod being slain by God and the gospel spreading triumphantly. So it shall be until the end! The church of God is safe, the gospel of God is safe, the glory of God is safe, because God is on his throne! John Newton once wrote, "If you think you see the ark of God falling, you can be sure it is due to a swimming in your head."

37. THE WORK TO WHICH GOD HAS CALLED US

Acts 13:1–13

The revealed purpose of God for his church is that it should be the means by which the gospel of his free and sovereign grace in Christ is preached throughout the world (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:45–48; Acts 1:8). Every local church has, by divine mandate, a singular purpose for existence, and that purpose is that it be a lighthouse, a sounding board for the gospel. The church of Christ is to be a preaching center, no more and no less, in which the gospel of Christ is preserved from generation to generation and from which it is preached unto all men (1 Timothy 3:15). Every believer is called of God to be a missionary, a witness for him (

John 20:21; Isaiah 44:8). Our business, our goal and occupation in life is to seek the Lord's sheep, the salvation of God's elect.

I can think of no reason for God leaving his people in this world except to use them for the saving of chosen, redeemed sinners. Every believer is completely fit for Heaven (Colossians 1:12). We are completely forgiven of all sin, perfectly righteous, and approved of by God through the sin-atoning blood and imputed righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we have been given a righteous nature in regeneration. Righteousness has been imparted to us by the Spirit of God. Why then has God left us in this world to live in this body of flesh? It is because he has chosen to use saved sinners to carry the gospel to other sinners for the saving of his elect!

In Acts 13 the Holy Spirit has recorded for our learning the beginning of world evangelism. In this chapter God's eternal purpose that the gospel be preached in all the world began to be fulfilled. Prior to this the center of the church was Jerusalem. From this point forward (in the Book of Acts) it is the Gentile city of Antioch. Prior to this the primary spokesman was Peter, the apostle of the circumcision. From this point on it is Paul, the apostle of the uncircumcision. Prior to this the gospel had been preached basically to the Jews only. From this point on it is preached to the Gentiles. Prior to this the church was still bound with many of the fetters of Jewish legal worship. From this point forward the chains of bondage are completely broken.

Acts 13 marks the point in history when the Lord God began gathering his elect from the four corners of the earth by the preaching of the gospel of his dear Son. In this study we will consider seven things about the work to which God has called us.

First, GOD HAS AN ELECT PEOPLE WHOM HE HAS DETERMINED TO SAVE IN EVERY PART OF THE WORLD. It never was God's intention, desire, will, or purpose that the gospel of his grace be preached only among the Jews. God's church and kingdom is made up of men and women of every nation, kindred, tribe, and tongue upon the earth (Rev. 5:9). There are some among all people to whom God will be gracious, some who must be saved, because God purposed to save them. It has always been the purpose of God to gather his elect from the four corners of the earth. The Israel of God, his church, is made up of his …

"Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth!" The Word of God plainly asserts that God's elective purpose has never been limited to a singular race, or class of men. His purpose of grace includes people from every race, from all parts of the world, Jews and Gentiles, blacks and whites, rich and poor, male and female, learned and unlearned (Genesis 22:17–18; Exodus 29:46; Isaiah 11:10; 49:6; Hebrews 1:10; John 3:16; Acts 9:15; Galatians 1:15–16). God will fulfill his covenant. He will accomplish his purpose. All his elect must be saved. Therefore, he has sent his church into the world to preach the gospel. What wondrous, condescending grace! Certainly, the sovereign, almighty Lord God could have saved his chosen without the use of means. But he has chosen to use saved sinners to carry the gospel to chosen, redeemed sinners who must be saved (Acts 26:16–18).

Second, THE INSTRUMENT BY WHICH GOD ACCOMPLISHES HIS PURPOSE OF GRACE IN THIS WORLD IS HIS CHURCH (verses 1–5). God's purpose of grace is accomplished through his church. The church of Christ is separated and called of God unto the work of proclaiming the gospel. Throughout history men have attempted to bypass the church and do the work of evangelism outside and apart from the church. But God's work must be done in God's prescribed way. No organization can replace the church of Christ. No one else can or should do the work God has called us to do. And the work of evangelism cannot be done by any means other than the preaching of the gospel, either publicly or privately. The church of the living God is the pillar of the truth, the preserver of the truth, and the proclaimer of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). We are the stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1–2; 1 Peter 4:10). God has entrusted his church with the gospel. It is our responsibility to faithfully proclaim it.

Third, THE LORD GOD ALWAYS RAISES UP PREACHERS WITHIN HIS CHURCH SUFFICIENT TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSE OF GRACE (verses 1–5). We sometimes think there is a deficiency, but there is not. When God has a work to do, he always raises up the men needed to do it, and gifts them with whatever is needed to do the work. These verses show us five things that are true of all true gospel preachers. (1) They are called of God. (2) They are recognized by the church of God as men gifted and called to the work of the ministry. (3) They are separated unto the work of the gospel. (4) They are filled with and led by the Spirit of God. And (5) They preach the Word of God faithfully.

Fourth, THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IS ALWAYS EFFECTUAL (verses 6–12). None of God's servants labor in vain (Isaiah 55:11). Some believe and some believe not (Acts 28:24). Either way, when the gospel is preached God is honored and his purpose is accomplished (1 Corinthians 2:14–17).

Fifth, GOD'S ORDAINED MEANS FOR THE SAVING OF HIS ELECT IS THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL. This is God's method of grace. He has chosen to save them that believe by the foolishness of preaching (Romans 1:16; 10:14–17; 1 Corinthians 1:21–23; Hebrews 4:12; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23–25). The faithful proclamation of God's holy, sovereign character, man's lost and ruined condition, and Christ's effectual, substitutionary atonement is the message by which the Word of God is preached unto men.

Sixth, FAITHFUL WITNESSES WILL MEET WITH MUCH OPPOSITION AND SUFFER PAINFUL DISAPPOINTMENTS IN THIS WORLD (verses 6–8, 13). As were Paul and Barnabas, we will be opposed by false prophets and false religion. And we will sometimes be disappointed by our brethren. Men of sinful flesh will disappoint one another, even believers, like John Mark (v. 13; 15:36–39; 2 Timothy 4:11). But we must not be discouraged. We must persevere in the work to which God has called us, because …

Seventh, THE PURPOSE OF OUR GOD AND THE CAUSE OF CHRIST WILL BE TRIUMPHANT AT LAST. God shall have his elect (John 6:37–40). Christ shall have his ransomed (Isaiah 53:10–11). The Spirit shall have the called (Ephesians 1:13–14). Our labor is not in vain in the Lord!

38. THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL

Acts 13:14–41

When the rulers of the synagogue at Antioch, Pisidia asked Paul and Barnabas if they had "any words of exhortation for the people", Paul seized the opportunity (Acts 13:14–16). His sermon is recorded for us in verses 17–41. It is essentially the same message he had heard Stephen preach in chapter 7.

The Jews were very interested in two things: (1) The Old Testament Scriptures, and (2) The Promise of the Messiah. Paul met them at the place of their interest and preached Christ to them. He did not debate with them. He simply preached Christ to them. He did so boldly in simple, unmistakable, irrefutable terms. He spoke with such clarity that when he was done with his sermon everyone in the synagogue understood exactly what he had said. Thus, by example as well as by precept, Paul shows us what preaching is. It is the bold and clear declaration of the free grace of God toward sinners through the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 2:1–8). In this passage of Holy Scripture the Apostle Paul declared the message of the gospel in five points.

THE GLORIOUS SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD (verses 17–19). When he stood to preach the gospel the first words that fell from his lips declared the sovereignty of God. First, he spoke of God's sovereignty in election. "The God of this people of Israel chose our fathers" (v. 17). In the Old Testament God chose to make himself known only to the children of Israel, passing by all other nations. His choice of Israel was a matter of unconditional grace and absolute sovereignty (Deuteronomy 7:7–9). Even so, in his sovereign, electing love, God chose to save a great multitude from Adam's fallen race through the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3–6; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14).

Secondly, Paul spoke of God's sovereignty in redemption. "With an high arm he brought them out of Egypt" (v. 17). God's deliverance, or redemption of Israel out of Egypt was typical of the redemption and salvation of his elect by Christ. As such, it was an act of particular, distinguishing, irresistible, and effectual grace. No sacrifice was provided for, no mercy was offered to, no grace was exercised toward the Egyptians. Everything that God did in the affair was for an elect, chosen people. So too, in the redemptive work of Christ and in the saving operations of his Spirit, everything is for God's elect. Christ died for and redeemed God's elect (Isaiah 53:8; John 10:11, 15). The Holy Spirit regenerates and calls God's elect, those who were redeemed by Christ (Psalm 65:4). Even the intercessory prayers of Christ are made only for God's elect (John 17:9, 20). Those whom God purposed to bring out of Egypt, he brought out. Not even a hoof of the herds of Israel was left behind (Exodus 10:26). And all whom God purposed to redeem by Christ were redeemed by him (Galatians 3:13) and shall be saved by him (John 6:37–40). Not one shall be lost (Romans 8:28–30).

Thirdly, the Apostle declared God's sovereignty in the operations of his grace and the works of providence. The inheritance of Israel in the land of Canaan was entirely the gift of God's sovereign grace. "He divided their land unto them by lot" (v. 19). That means he did it without man's choice or will (Proverbs 16:33). Israel did not conquer the land of Canaan. God conquered their enemies before them. Israel simply took possession of the land at God's command, and received their inheritance by his decree. Even so, God's elect do not conquer their enemies, the world, the flesh, and the devil. Christ did that for us. We do not win eternal salvation. Christ won it for us! The believer simply takes possession of these things by faith at God's command.

THE TOTAL DEPRAVITY AND SINFULNESS OF MAN (verses 18–21). The history of Israel is a history of human sin and divine mercy (Psalm 78; 103). The people whom God chose and redeemed as types of his elect were a sinful, undeserving, rebellious people. Paul here declares that God's elect, like all other men, are fallen, depraved, justly condemned children of Adam (Romans 5:12; Ephesians 2:1–4).

THE SURE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE (verses 22–23). Throughout this brief survey of Old Testament history Paul was driving one point home to his hearers: God's purpose of grace is sure! God promised a Redeemer, a King, and a Savior, and he must come! Our great God so wisely and sovereignly rules this world that even the depraved hearts and sinful acts of men cannot thwart his purpose. In fact, they are instruments by which God fulfills his eternal purpose of grace (Psalm 76:10). This is Paul's doctrine: In spite of our sin, rebellion, and unbelief, God is faithful! "God according to his promise raised unto Israel a Savior, Jesus!"

THE PERSON AND WORK OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST (verses 24–39). Paul's message was "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). Everything he had said in the preceding verses was leading up to this point. In this part of his message the Apostle tells us five things about the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. CHRIST CAME (verses 24–27). John the Baptist had but one mission. He was sent to prepare the way for and identify the Lord Jesus Christ. When he saw him, he pointed to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world … This is the Son of God!" (John 1:29–34). God himself assumed human flesh! "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The Son of God came into this world to save sinners by the sacrifice of himself.

2. CHRIST DIED (verses 27–29). Though he was clearly an innocent, righteous man, one who "knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21), he was despised and rejected of men and was put to death under the penalty of the law, according to the Scriptures. The Son of God died by the hands of wicked men, but he died according to the purpose of God (Acts 2:23). As the sinners' Substitute he died as a common criminal under the wrath of God, to satisfy the justice of God for his people. Christ died that he might save guilty sinners from the wrath of God (Isaiah 53:4–11; Romans 5:6–8; Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 1:18–20; 3:18).

3. CHRIST AROSE (verses 30–37). The resurrection of Christ is God's public declaration that he is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Son of David, that he has put away the sins of his people which were imputed to him by the satisfaction of divine justice, and that the "sure mercies of David", (the sure mercies of God in Christ), shall be bestowed upon all his people.

4. CHRIST REIGNS (verses 33–34). Jesus Christ is King! He reigns as the Son of David, the Son of Man upon the throne of God to give eternal life, to dispense "the sure mercies of David" to chosen sinners (John 17:2).

5. CHRIST SAVES (verses 38–39). The gospel of the free grace of God in Christ is the message of redemption accomplished by the substitutionary sacrifice of the Son of God. It is the proclamation of the free forgiveness of sins and complete justification for all who believe upon the grounds of justice satisfied and righteousness imputed (1 John 1:9; Romans 3:24–26).

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MAN (verses 40–41). "To you is the word of this salvation sent" (v. 26). It is the responsibility of all to believe it. If you do, if you trust the Lord Jesus Christ, you shall live forever. If you refuse to believe, if you reject the gospel and despise the Son of God, unutterable woe shall be your eternal portion (Mark 16:16).

39. OUR LABOR IS NOT IN VAIN

Acts 13:42–52

When Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel at Antioch, Pisidia, the Jews "were filled with envy" and spoke against the gospel, contradicting it and blaspheming God. They willfully and deliberately refused to believe the revelation of God concerning his Son. Despising Christ, despising the gospel of the grace of God, and despising the messengers of grace, they brought destruction upon themselves. But Paul and Barnabas were not turned away from their noble work. Neither the instability of their brother and friend, John Mark, nor the unbelief and opposition of the Jews could deter them from their work. The Jews would not hear them, so they turned to the Gentiles and preached the gospel to them. Thus, they were instruments in God's hand by which he accomplished his eternal purpose of grace in the saving of his elect among the Gentiles (Isaiah 55:11). There are five lessons clearly taught in this passage of Holy Scripture.

First, ALL WHO BELIEVE THE GOSPEL SHOULD SEIZE EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO PREACH THE GOSPEL (verses 42–44). After Paul had finished preaching, the Jews walked out in angry protest. But there were some Gentiles present whose hearts were affected by the message. They asked Paul and Barnabas to preach to them through the week and on the next Sabbath, which they gladly did. While at Antioch they preached in the Jewish synagogue and on the streets to the great multitudes who gathered to hear them and to individuals as God gave them opportunity. They looked for opportunities to speak to eternity bound sinners about their souls and to preach Christ to them. And they seized every opportunity God gave them. In that regard they are examples to all believers in this world. Every pastor, every gospel preacher must relentlessly give himself to the work of the ministry, to the business of faithfully preaching the gospel (1 Timothy 4:12–16; 2 Timothy 4:1–5). And every believer should look for and seize every opportunity to bear faithful witness to perishing sinners concerning the things of Christ (John 20:21; Acts 1:8). We all make excuses for not witnessing to the people around us, but we are without excuse. If we refuse to honestly and openly confess Christ to others, it is either because we do not care that people are perishing without him, or because we fear their reaction to us, or because we do not really believe in the power of the gospel. Many who would gladly preach to thousands where they might be applauded often refuse to preach to one for fear of scorn!

Secondly, ALL WHO FAITHFULLY PREACH THE GOSPEL WILL MEET WITH OPPOSITION IN THIS WORLD (verses 45–46). It is not possible to faithfully preach the gospel of Christ without offending the enemies of Christ. People who are opposed to Christ will be opposed to anyone who faithfully represents Christ to them (1 Corinthians 1:22–24). When men and women oppose God's preachers, those who faithfully preach the gospel of Christ, they are fighting against God (1 Samuel 8:7). The Jews at Antioch did not merely reject Paul and Barnabas. They did not merely reject a sermon they did not like. They rejected the Lord Jesus Christ and the message of God's free grace in him. In doing so they judged themselves unworthy of everlasting life. "The Jews, by this act of theirs in rejecting the Gospel, did as it were pass sentence upon themselves that they ought not to be saved, since they despised the means of salvation"—(John Gill).

This is a very solemn matter! These men and women, by their rejection of the gospel became reprobate. God left them to their just condemnation and hardened their hearts in unbelief (Hosea 4:17; John 12:39–40; Romans 11:8–11). The judgment of God that fell upon them should be alarming to any who hear but refuse to believe the gospel of God's free grace in Christ. To reject the gospel of Christ is to court reprobation. It is to court the judgment of God. Willful unbelief, the willful rejection of the gospel involves four things:

1. It calls God a liar (1 John 4:10). 2. It despises the precious blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:29). 3. It fights against God (Isaiah 63:10). 4. It is the judgment of self as one worthy of eternal damnation.

A person's rejection of the gospel, the rejection of Christ, is a decided, deliberate act of his own will. The unbelieving heart is so obstinately proud that it chooses destruction before it will bow to the rule of Christ. God declares that in Hell the damned who suffer his wrath eat the fruit of their own freewill (Proverbs 1:31).

Thirdly, A MAN'S FAITHFULNESS IN PREACHING THE GOSPEL IS NOT TO BE DETERMINED BY HIS SUCCESS, BUT BY HIS OBEDIENCE TO THE COMMANDMENT OF GOD (v. 47). When Paul and Barnabas found that their message had been rejected, they did not turn away from their work. It never entered their minds to do so. They did not compromise their message. It never occurred to them that they might be more successful if they were a bit less dogmatic in their doctrine. They simply did what they had always done—They went on preaching the gospel. They changed nothing, not their message, nor their method, nor their manners.

The prophecy referred to in verse 47 (Isaiah 49:6) refers to Christ himself, but Paul applies it to all who preach the gospel because all true gospel preachers are laborers together with Christ (1 Corinthians 3:9). In the Word of God those who preach the gospel are so closely connected to Christ in their work that they are called both lights and saviors (Matthew 5:14; Obad. 21; 1 Timothy 4:16).

God requires only one thing of his servants—Faithfulness. He does not require success. But he does require faithfulness. It is the responsibility of every child of God and every servant of God to faithfully serve the honor of God, the will of God, and the people of God as providence directs and the Holy Spirit leads (1 Corinthians 4:1–2; 2 Corinthians 4:1–7). Let us ever be found faithful to the glory of God, the gospel of Christ, and the souls of men with the talents we have, in the place where God puts us.

Fourthly, AS GOD'S SERVANTS FAITHFULLY PREACH THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST HE SOVEREIGNLY ACCOMPLISHES HIS PURPOSE OF GRACE (verses 48–49). Some believe and some believe not, but God's purpose is always accomplished. Though the Jews did exactly what they wanted to do, yet by their unbelief the gospel has been sent to chosen sinners throughout the world (

Romans 11:22–23, 32–36). Verses 48 and 49 demonstrate four gospel truths with striking clarity:

1. Unbelief is the cause of eternal damnation (v. 46; John 3:36).2. Election is the cause of saving faith (2 Thessalonians 2:13–14).3. All who obey the gospel in time were ordained to eternal life in eternity (1 Thessalonians 1:4–5).4. The preaching of the gospel always accomplishes God's purpose and glorifies him (1 Corinthians 2:14–16).

God will save his elect. He will glorify himself. He will honor his Word (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Fifthly, BY THE FAITHFUL DISCHARGE OF THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES GOD GIVES HIS SERVANTS CONFIDENCE AND JOY BEFORE HIM (verses 50–52). When they were thrown out of Antioch for preaching the gospel Paul and Barnabas "shook off the dust of their feet" against their persecutors, being free from their blood (Luke 9:5; Ezekiel 33:8–9), and went on to proclaim God's saving grace in another place. And they were "filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit". They had faithfully discharged their responsibilities as God's servants. Therefore, they rejoiced before him (2 Timothy 4:6–8).

40. TWO FAITHFUL GOSPEL PREACHERS

Acts 14:1–28

After preaching the gospel at Antioch, Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas came to Iconium and preached Christ there. There was a great division among the people at Iconium over the message of God's saving grace in Christ. God's servants were assaulted and abused, and would have been stoned had they not fled to Lycaonia. "And there they preached the gospel." At Lystra Paul healed a lame man by the power of God and all the people came to worship him and Barnabas as gods. "They called Barnabas, Jupiter, and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker." Had Paul and Barnabas not prevented it, the people of Lystra would have sacrificed animals to them! Yet, when Paul denounced their idolatry and preached the living God to them, they stoned him, drug him out of the city, and left him for dead. But he arose and came back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left on another preaching mission. They went to Derbe, back to Lystra, to Iconium, and to Antioch, Pisidia again, preaching the gospel of Christ, confirming the brethren, and ordaining elders in every church. After that they passed through Pisidia and preached the Word in Pamphylia, Perga, and Attalia. Then they returned to Antioch in Syria to give a report of all that had taken place on their first missionary journey (verses 27–28; Acts 13:1–3).

This brief summary of Acts 14 clearly demonstrates the fact that Paul and Barnabas were faithful gospel preachers of the apostolic age. They are held up by the Holy Spirit as examples to all who preach the gospel. The entire book of Acts is a history of preaching in the early church. It is evident that the Spirit of God intends for churches and individual believers to be well informed about the work and responsibilities of faithful gospel preachers.

If God speaks to men it will be through the lips of a man preaching the gospel. Therefore, there are certain questions which should be of great interest to all people, all believers, and all local churches: What preachers should we hear? What kind of man is a preacher to be? What is involved in the work of the ministry? How can believers best pray for, support, and assist those men who preach the gospel? These questions are clearly answered in the Word of God (1 Timothy 3:1–7; 4:12–16; 2 Timothy 4:1–4; Titus 1:5–9). They are also answered by example. In Acts 14 the Holy Spirit holds Paul and Barnabas up as examples of true and faithful preachers of the gospel.

WHAT DID THESE TWO MEN PREACH? Paul and Barnabas preached to a lot of people in a lot of places. They preached to Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, men and women, young and old, religious people and profane people, influential people and despised people, believers and unbelievers. Yet, their message was always the same. Wherever they were, "there they preached the gospel" (v. 7; 1 Corinthians 1:17–24). All true gospel preachers have but one message—"Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:1–5). Regarding that message they all see eye to eye and speak with one voice (Isaiah 52:7–8). Christ crucified is the theme of Holy Scripture and the theme of every gospel preacher (Luke 24:27, 44–47). Richard Sibbes once said, "Preaching is the chariot that carries Christ up and down the world." Writing to preachers, Richard Baxter was exactly right when he said, "If we can but teach Christ to our people, we teach them all." The preaching of Christ crucified involves, at the very least, the clear declaration of these three things:

1. The Glory of His Person as the God-Man Mediator (John 1:1–3, 14, 18; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Philippians 2:5–8; 1 Timothy 6:14–16; Hebrews 1:1–3; 1 John 5:7).

2. The Efficacy of His Work as the Sinners' Substitute (Isaiah 53:10–11; Romans 5:19; 8:34; Galatians 3:13; Hebrews 9:12; 10:10–14).

3. The Universal Sovereignty of His Dominion (John 17:2; Romans 14:9; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Philippians 2:9–11; Hebrews 10:12–13).

Every preacher must be judged, or examined, first and foremost, by the theme of his ministry. If the theme of his ministry is not distinctively and pre-eminently the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, he is not the servant of God!

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN PAUL AND BARNABAS PREACHED CHRIST CRUCIFIED? When men preach the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit one of two things always happens: either they bow to Christ in faith or they rebel against him in obstinate unbelief. It is impossible to stand before the throne of the sovereign Christ with indifference (Acts 13:48, 50; 14:1–5, 19–20; 2 Corinthians 2:14–16). As it has been, it is now, and shall always be: To the Jews, lost religionists, Christ crucified is a stumbling block. To the Gentiles, lost intellectuals, the imaginary wise people of the world, Christ crucified is foolishness. But to them who are called of God, those who are saved by God's grace, Christ crucified is the wisdom of God revealed and the power of God experienced in their souls (1 Corinthians 1:23–24). Everywhere they went Paul and Barnabas preached Christ and him crucified to all who would hear them. The response of the people was always the same. Some believed and some believed not. So it is to this day—wherever Christ is preached there is "a division among the people because of him" (John 7:43).

WHAT WAS THE ATTITUDE OF GOD'S SERVANTS TOWARD THE MINISTRY? Though they met with much opposition everywhere they went, Paul and Barnabas proved themselves to be men of uncompromising dedication (verses 19–21). Though Paul was stoned and left for dead at Lystra, he went right back into the city, and later returned again to preach the gospel to the very people who stoned him (v. 21). They were thoroughly committed to the work God had put into their hands (Acts 20:24). Being committed to the work of preaching the gospel, they were men of unswerving faithfulness (2 Corinthians 4:1–7). Regardless of their circumstances, regardless of the consequences of their actions, Paul and Barnabas faithfully sought the will and glory of God, faithfully ministered to the souls of men, and faithfully proclaimed the doctrine of the gospel. They were men of unquestioning faith. Believing God, they went about their work trusting him to open the door before them, provide their needs, and protect them. Faith makes the servants of God independent of all men (Acts 13:51; Genesis 14:21–23). Faith makes gospel preachers bold, even in the face of numerous, influential, and powerful enemies (Acts 15:26). They live and preach with boldness. William Gurnall wrote, "A preacher without boldness is like a smooth file," utterly useless! Faith in Christ makes men bold in the cause of God, for the honor of Christ, and in defense of the truth of the gospel.

WHAT MOTIVATED PAUL AND BARNABAS IN THEIR WORK? Clearly, they were not motivated by money, power, or fame. They gained none of these things. That which motivated them and motivates all who are truly the servants of God was a desire for the glory of God in Christ to be made known unto men (2 Corinthians 4:3–6; 1 Kings 18:36–37), an ambition for the salvation of God's elect (1 Corinthians 9:22), and a genuine concern for the spiritual and eternal welfare of God's church and kingdom (Acts 14:22–26).

WHAT WAS THE SOURCE OF THEIR STRENGTH? It is evident that Paul and Barnabas were men of great courage and strength. They seem to have feared nothing. Nothing appears to have discouraged them. Nothing could stop them (v. 27). What gave them such courage and strength? Three things: (1) They rested in God's providence. When they told their brethren all that happened to them and with them, they said, "God did it!" (2) They relied upon God's power. They realized that it was God alone who had opened the door before them. And (3) they recognized God's purpose in all things, in their trials as well as their triumphs. What can you do with men like that? You can stand back and watch them, or you can join them in their labors, but you cannot stop them. To fight against them is to fight against God!

41. THE CONFERENCE AT JERUSALEM

Acts 15:1–41

Throughout the history of Christianity there have been numerous church councils. Some have been of monumental significance, but most have been of very little consequence. Denominational churches have regular councils for the purpose of determining both doctrine and practices among the churches of the denomination. In those councils three things always take place: debate, negotiation, and compromise. In order for opposing parties to get along and function together in a united, co-operative program, there must be compromise on both sides. That is the way denominations survive. But with men of principle and conviction there can be no compromise. The truth of God is not debatable! It is not possible for a person or a church believing the gospel to co-operate with people who do not believe the gospel in religious works and activities.

The conference at Jerusalem was not that kind of religious council. The apostles and elders met at Jerusalem not to debate doctrine, but to declare the truth of God with a unified voice. In that day, as in ours, there were legalists in the church who tried to mix law and grace, trying to bring God's elect under the yoke of legal bondage, subverting their souls. Therefore the church at Jerusalem held a conference. Many apostles, elders, and preachers attended, but only three spoke: Paul, Peter, and James. They spoke as one and the church made a unified denunciation of legalism. In Acts 15 Luke gives us the historical narrative of the conference. Paul explains the theological issues of it in Galatians 2.

As stated above, the conference at Jerusalem was not a church council to debate doctrine. When Paul went up to Jerusalem his mind was already made up. He refused to budge an inch, or give any ground at all to the legalists (Galatians 2:5, 21). He went to Jerusalem only so that the doctrine of the believer's absolute freedom in Christ from the law of Moses might be publicly avowed, even by those whose primary sphere of ministry was among the Jews. At the Jerusalem conference the apostles and elders, and the church as a whole, being led by the Holy Spirit (v. 28), publicly denounced legalism and stripped all preachers of law and legality of all credibility.

THE CONFRONTATION WITH THE LEGALISTS (verses 1–3)—There were some self-appointed, freelance preachers who came from Jerusalem to Antioch perverting the gospel, teaching salvation by the works of the law. They were Pharisees who professed faith in Christ. They claimed to believe the gospel doctrine of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. But they mixed works with grace and said, "Unless you keep the law you cannot be saved." Paul, Barnabas, and the church at Antioch, by their example, demonstrate that the doctrine and spirit of legalism must never be tolerated (Galatians 2:1–5). Paul declares the legalists to be "false brethren". It matters not whether men teach obedience to the law as a basis of justification, the measure of sanctification, the believer's rule of life, the motive for Christian service, or the ground of reward in Heaven, all attempts to put believers under the yoke of the law are intolerably evil. The word of God states emphatically and plainly that in Christ we are free from and no longer under the law (Romans 6:14–15; 7:4; 10:4; Galatians 3:24–26; 5:1–4; Colossians 2:8–23; 1 Timothy 1:5–10). Never, not even once, in the New Testament is a believer commanded to do anything on the basis of, or being motivated by the law. So far is the law from being a rule of life that Paul declares it is "the ministration of death" (2 Corinthians 3:7). Legalists say, "The preaching of the law promotes holiness." But Paul says the law is "the strength of sin" (1 Corinthians 15:56). Let no one be confused. The issue is not godliness or ungodliness. The issue is not what a believer does. The issue is the motive of the heart. Legalists are motivated by fear of punishment and desire for reward. Believers are motivated by love for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14).

THE CONFERENCE OF THE LEADERS (verses 4–21)—There were many gifted men in the church in those days, but three stood out as men gifted of God and specifically chosen by him to be his messengers to that first generation of Christians. The first spokesman at the conference was Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (verses 4–6). The second preacher was Peter, the apostle to the Jews (verses 7–11). His message had two main points: (1) God purifies the hearts of men by faith in Christ (v. 9); and (2) Salvation is by grace alone (v. 11). In verse 12 Paul rose to speak again, declaring what wonders God had done through him and Barnabas among the Gentiles. The third man to speak at the conference was James, our Lord's half brother, pastor of the church at Jerusalem (verses 13–21). It was fitting that he bring the concluding message. He gave the opinion of the apostles, the opinion of the Holy Spirit, the opinion of the New Testament regarding the issue at hand (the relation of the law to believers in the New Testament age) in four points.

1. The calling of the Gentiles in one body with the Jews was foretold by the prophets (verses 13–17; Isaiah 11:10; Amos 9:11–12).

2. The fall of Israel and the calling of the Gentiles was according to the eternal purpose of God (v. 18; Romans 11:25–26).

3. Believers in the Gentile world must never be troubled with the yoke of bondage, which no man other than Jesus Christ the God-man has ever kept (verses 19, 10).

4. In matters of indifference it was recommended that the Gentile believers should abstain from those things that might hinder the preaching of the gospel and offend weaker brethren (verses 20–21). NOTE: Certainly fornication is not a matter of indifference. It is a horribly evil thing. Yet, it was treated as a matter of indifference because to the Gentiles, who were uninstructed in the law of God, it was commonly looked upon as such.

THE CIRCULATION OF THE LETTER (verses 22–34)—The church at Jerusalem drafted a letter to be sent to the churches in the Gentile world. To confirm the truthfulness of the letter they sent Judas and Silas back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. The letter denounced all preachers of the law as false prophets (v. 24), commended Paul and Barnabas as faithful servants of God (verses 25–26), and assured God's saints that their liberty in Christ was approved of God (verses 28–29). When it was read in the churches this letter was the cause of great joy among God's saints (v. 31).

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN TWO LABORERS (verses 36–41)—Paul and Barnabas had labored together for a long time. They stood shoulder to shoulder in the heat of battle. They had, at least for the time being, settled the issue of legalism. But Satan is a crafty foe. He could not frighten either man by persecution. He could not divide the two doctrinally. But the old serpent found a weak point and exploited it to divide these two brethren—John Mark, Barnabas' nephew. Perhaps Barnabas was too lenient with Mark. Perhaps Paul was too severe. We are not told. But these two friends left one another in an angry dispute. What a shame! Yet, God providentially overruled this evil for the good of his church and the furtherance of the gospel (Psalm 76:10). Instead of one missionary team, now there were two. God blesses in spite of our failures!

42. GOSPEL PURIFICATION

Acts 15:8–9

Every true believer desires to worship God with a pure heart and honor him with a life of purity. According to the apostle John, the believer's hope of eternal life in Christ inspires in him an insatiable desire for purity. "Every man that has this hope in him," (the hope of seeing Christ and being like Christ), "purifies himself, even as he is pure" (1 John 3:3). But how is this purification accomplished? That is the question I want to answer in this lesson.

In the Old Testament, under the types and shadows of the Mosaic dispensation, there were many forms of ceremonial purification which the children of Israel were required to meticulously obey. The instruments of service in the tabernacle and later in the temple were ceremonially purified by being washed with water and sprinkled with blood. The priests and their garments were purified by ceremonial washings. Women were required to purify themselves before marriage, after childbirth, and following every period of menstruation. And the people were required to purify themselves before observing the appointed feasts and holy ordinances of divine worship. But the first and most important means of legal, ceremonial purification was circumcision. This seal of God's covenant with Abraham symbolically pictured the purification of God's elect by the Holy Spirit in regeneration (Philippians 3:3; Colossians 2:11).

Those Old Testament ceremonies of purification were all outward. They did nothing to purify the heart. They only pictured the purification of the heart by the grace of God. However, by the end of the legal dispensation, by the time Christ appeared, the Jews' religion had degenerated into base idolatry, self-righteousness, and will worship. They looked upon the mere observance of outward ceremonies as the actual purifying of their hearts and made their outward religious services the basis of their acceptance with God! They thought God would accept them because they were outwardly, ceremonially clean, even though their hearts were vile (Matthew 23:25–28; Luke 16:15).

Though those rituals were only temporary symbols and pictures of gospel purification, there were many in the early church who were still Pharisees. They insisted that the Gentile believers be compelled to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:1, 5). It was bad enough to have Pharisees outside the church persecuting it, but when the legalists joined the church and tried to pervert the gospel, subverting men's souls, the evil was intolerable (Acts 15:24; Galatians 1:6–8; 2:4–5; 3:1–3; 5:2, 4, 12). Those "false brethren", as Paul calls them, are still with us today. They are still stirring up strife and endeavoring to bring all believers into legal bondage. They make holiness and purity a matter of outward, legal obedience to the law of Moses, or (even worse) to the religious laws and customs of men. It is the spirit and doctrine of legalism that the early church confronted and denounced at the Jerusalem conference. It is an evil that must not be tolerated. Peter plainly declares that those who preach and teach legalistic doctrine are guilty of tempting God, walking directly contrary to his revealed will (Acts 15:10; Colossians 2:16–23; 1 Timothy 4:1–5).

In Acts 15:8–9 the apostle reproves the Judaizers and denounces their doctrine by reminding those present at the conference of God's work of grace upon Cornelius and his household, all of whom were uncircumcised Gentiles (Acts 10:43–44). Speaking by the Spirit of God, Peter plainly declared two facts that many today either are ignorant of or fail to appreciate.

First, IN CHRIST ALL GOD'S ELECT ARE ONE, AND BEING ONE IN CHRIST, ALL BELIEVERS ARE EQUAL BEFORE THE LORD—"God put no difference between us and them." There are no second class citizens in the kingdom of Heaven (Ephesians 2:11–19; 4:1–7; Colossians 3:11). Our standing and acceptance with God is determined entirely by our relation to the Lord Jesus Christ, our Substitute, not by something we do. We are complete in him (Colossians 2:10). Our experiences may vary, and our understanding of spiritual things on this earth may differ, but there is "no difference between us" in the sight of God. In Christ all true believers are LOVED with the same love (1 John 3:1) … CHOSEN by the same grace (Ephesians 1:4–6) … BLESSED with the same privileges (Ephesians 1:3) … REDEEMED by the same blood (1 Peter 1:18–20) … QUICKENED by the same Spirit (Ephesians 2:1–4) … ROBED in the same righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6) … PARTAKERS of the same divine nature (2 Peter 1:4) … ADOPTED into the same family (Galatians 4:4–6) … BUILT upon the same foundation (Ephesians 2:20–22) … CHILDREN of the same Father (Matthew 6:9) … SERVANTS of the same Master (1 Corinthians 7:20–23) … POSSESSORS of the same hope (Romans 8:24–25) … PARTAKERS of the same promises (2 Corinthians 1:20) … HEIRS of the same inheritance (Romans 8:17) … and BENEFICIARIES of the same Intercessor (John 17:20–26).

Second, GOD PURIFIES THE HEARTS OF HIS PEOPLE BY FAITH IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. "God put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith." By nature our hearts are defiled and filthy (Matthew 15:17–19; Romans 8:7). This defilement of the heart reaches to all the members of the body, and the faculties of the soul" (John Gill). Read Romans 3:9–19. The total depravity of the human heart is an inescapable fact.

1. The work of purifying the heart can be performed by God alone. Peter did not say, "Cornelius purified his heart," but "God purified his heart!" Ceremonial cleansing, moral reformation, sorrowful repentance, baptism, and religious services can never purify the heart of man. Only the application of Christ's blood to the heart by God's almighty grace can purify it (Hebrews 9:12–14; Titus 3:4–7).

2. The means of purification is God given faith in Christ. "Faith changes the current of our love, and alters the motive which sways us: this is what is meant by purifying the heart. It makes us love that which is good and right, and moves us with motives free from self and sin. This is a great work indeed!" (C. H. Spurgeon). Faith in Christ purifies the heart by …

— Freeing us from the guilt of sin and terror of the law (Hebrews 9:14; 1 John 3:21).

— Its overwhelming realization of the love of Christ for us (2 Corinthians 5:14).

— Bringing us into intimate communion with Christ (Song of Sol. 1:2; 2:4, 6).

— Enabling us to realize, in some measure, the manifold blessings and privileges we enjoy in Christ by the grace of God (Ephesians 1:3–14).

— Fixing our hearts upon Christ and the heavenly, eternal things promised to us in him (2 Corinthians 4:17–5:1; Colossians 3:1–3; 1 John 3:1–3).

3. This purification of the believer's heart is a continual, daily exercise of divine grace (John 13:6–10). As we make our pilgrimage through this world, we are continually gathering the dirt of sin upon us. Therefore, we must continually go to the precious fountain and be washed in the blood of Christ (1 John 1:9).

43. "WE BELIEVE"

Acts 15:11

Peter was an apostle of Christ. The words he spoke at the Jerusalem conference, like those which he wrote in his epistles, were inspired by God the Holy Spirit (v. 28). The words of this eleventh verse, being inspired of God, are recorded for our learning and admonition. The apostle stood and said, "We believe." He spoke with bold, unbending, unyielding, uncompromising dogmatism. Speaking as an apostle of Christ, Peter was not speaking for himself alone, but for all the apostles, all the church of God, all true gospel preachers, and all true Christians. When he said, "We believe," he was saying, "This is the truth of God. It must be believed by all. Anything contrary to this is heresy, damnable and destructive to men's souls. This is what all true Christians believe. Those who do not believe and teach this are not Christians." This then is the doctrine of God—"We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they." With regard to this gospel doctrine of salvation by grace alone we must be perfectly clear in our understanding, unhesitating in our witness, and intolerant of any deviation from the message of God's pure, free, sovereign, effectual grace in Christ.

THIS IS AN APOSTOLIC CONFESSION OF FAITH. Concerning less important issues God's saints may and do differ and yet remain in essential harmony and fellowship. No one has a perfect knowledge of divine truth. But the gospel doctrine of salvation by grace alone is vital. With regard to this vital issue the doctrine of the church is stated plainly. "We believe that we shall be saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, even as they." All who deviate from this deviate from the doctrine of the apostles and deviate from Christ himself!

THE APOSTLES OF CHRIST OBVIOUSLY DID NOT BELIEVE MUCH OF WHAT IS TAUGHT TODAY ABOUT THE WAY OF SALVATION. Peter's statement is complete. It includes all that is vital to the souls of men. But some things are obviously and deliberately omitted.

There is no mention of any religious ritual or ceremony. The two ordinances which Christ left us, baptism and the Lord's Supper, are important aspects of worship and obedience. Believer's baptism is the believer's public confession of faith in and allegiance to Christ (Romans 6:4–6). The Lord's Supper is the church's celebration of redemption by Christ, a symbolic picture of the gospel, and a visible reminder of our Savior's glorious person and work (1 Corinthians 11:24–26). No mention is made of personal obedience to the law of God. That was the issue at the Jerusalem conference. Surely, if obedience to the law had any bearing upon salvation, sanctification, or our relationship to God, Peter would have mentioned it here. But we are not under the law and must never attempt to put any believer under the yoke of bondage (v. 10). There is no mention of personal righteousness. The creed of the world is, "Do the best you can and God will accept you." To deny that creed is treason against human pride. Every child of Adam is born a Pharisee. Self-righteousness is bred in us. It will manifest itself in time. But those who promote self-righteousness are treasonous toward God.

"Perish all thoughts of human pride, let God alone be magnified!" And no mention is made of man's freewill. It is true that all believers choose Christ, trust Christ, and come to Christ. But it is heretical to assert that man's freewill is the cause of God's saving grace (John 1:11–13; Romans 9:15–18; 2 Timothy 1:9).

PETER'S DOCTRINE IS THE DOCTRINE OF GRACE. He tells us that salvation is from beginning to end, all of grace. This is the doctrine of Christ and his apostles. This is the doctrine of the Bible. Any denial of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone is a denial of the gospel of Christ. All attempts to mix grace and works is antichrist. Seven things are implied and taught in Peter's words.

1. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD'S GRACE—He tells us that saving grace belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ. He gives it to whom he will (John 5:21; 17:2).

2. THE TOTAL DEPRAVITY OF MAN—When Peter speaks of people being "saved", the implication is that they do not have the ability to save themselves (Romans 5:12; Ephesians 2:1–3).

3. GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION—It is true, Peter does not mention the word election in this passage. But it must be remembered that his mind had not been corrupted by freewill, works religion. To Peter and the rest of the apostles the word "grace" always included election. They understood that the grace of God is eternal, unmerited, and immutable (1 Peter 1:2–5).

4. CHRIST'S LIMITED ATONEMENT—When Peter speaks of "grace", he is referring to that grace which comes flowing to sinners from the wounds of the crucified Christ, that grace which was effectually obtained for God's elect when Christ died as their Substitute and obtained eternal salvation for them (Hebrews 9:12; 1 Peter 1:18–21; 2:24). There are two points about the redemptive work of Christ upon which we must be clear. First, redemption was obtained for a particular people (Isaiah 53:8; John 10:11, 15, 26). Second, it was effectually accomplished when Christ died (Hebrews 9:10; Isaiah 53:10–12). Anyone who fails to see the fullness and efficacy of Christ's redemptive work cannot see any other gospel truth clearly.

5. GOD'S IRRESISTIBLE GRACE—Peter said, "We shall be saved." He does not speak of God's saving grace as a possibility, but as a matter of certainty. Salvation is not something God hopes to do. It is something God does (Psalm 65:4; 110:3).

6. THE FINAL PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS—Peter was not in a fog about what he believed. He knew that salvation is God's work. He knew that it was forever (Ecclesiastes 3:14). He knew that God's promise (John 10:27–29), his power (1 Peter 1:5), and his immutability (Malachi 3:6) demand the absolute, infallible, eternal security of his elect.

7. THE EQUALITY OF ALL BELIEVERS—When Peter said, "We shall be saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, even as they," he seems to imply that the Jewish believers have no preference over the Gentile believers. In Christ all are one! All are saved by grace alone (Colossians 3:11).

THIS IS THE CONFESSION OF EVERY TRUE BELIEVER. All who are saved are saved by grace alone and gladly acknowledge it (1 Corinthians 15:10). Self-righteous moralists, religious ritualists, and profligate sinners must all be saved the same way. Grace is unconditional! It is not attracted by good works, and it is not repelled by the lack of good works. Grace washes all believers in the blood of Christ, robes all in the righteousness of Christ, and makes all accepted in Christ. Some are more gifted than others, but none are more accepted. Some are more faithful than others, but none are more favored. Some are more confident than others, but none are more beloved, and none are more secure. This is our doctrine—"WE BELIEVE THAT THROUGH THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST WE SHALL BE SAVED, EVEN AS THEY."

44. A SPIRIT FILLED MINISTRY

Acts 16:1–8

The supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit by which the apostles were confirmed as the messengers of Christ (Hebrews 2:4) ceased when the canon of Holy Scripture was complete and the apostles had all died (1 Corinthians 13:10). The Bible is the perfect, complete Revelation of God. Nothing can be added to it or taken from it (Rev. 22:19). Since there are no inspired apostles today writing out a new word of revelation from God, there is no need for those gifts of a supernatural, miraculous nature by which the apostles were identified as apostles.

However, the ministries of God's servants today are just as truly Spirit filled ministries as were the ministries of his servants in the apostolic era. Every true gospel preacher, being called and directed in his labors by God the Holy Spirit, exercises a Spirit filled ministry as he preaches the gospel of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Acts 16:1–8 gives us an example of such a ministry. This chapter begins with Paul and Silas coming to Derbe and Lystra. It is the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey. We are told nothing more about Barnabas, but Paul and Silas continued to faithfully preach the gospel of Christ, being led by God the Holy Spirit in all things. That is what a Spirit filled ministry is. It is a ministry dictated by the Holy Spirit, a ministry controlled by and in submission to the Spirit of God (Ephesians 5:18). In these eight verses Luke shows us four things that characterize a Spirit filled ministry.

A MAN PREPARED BY GOD (verses 1–3)—Wherever you find a Spirit filled ministry you will find a man prepared by God for the work of the ministry. No man is called of God to preach the gospel who has not been prepared and qualified by God for the work (1 Timothy 3:1–7). When Paul came to Derbe and Lystra, he found a young man named Timothy, whom he ordained to the work of the gospel ministry (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6). Neither Paul nor Timothy knew how the Lord might be pleased to use him, but Timothy was a young man whom God had called and gifted for the work of preaching the gospel.

The Lord began his preparation of Timothy in his earliest years by his special providence. Timothy's mother, Eunice, was a Jewish woman who was a believer. His grandmother, Lois, had also been converted by the grace of God. From his earliest days of childhood Timothy had been taught the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make sinners wise unto salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 1:15; 3:15). Eunice gave her son the name "Timothy", which means "honored of God". Like Hannah of old, Eunice got her son from the Lord and gave him to the Lord. From his boyhood he was taught the Word of God.

It should be the greatest concern of parents to instruct their children in the gospel of Christ and train them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). If parents would train their children as they ought, they must …

1. Train them in the way the should go not the way they would go (Proverbs 22:6).

2. Discipline their children firmly and consistently, insisting that they behave the way they should (Proverbs 22:15; 23:12–14; 29:15).

3. Walk before their children in the way of faith and obedience, showing them the way by example (Genesis 18:19).

4. Pray for God's wisdom, direction, and grace in training their children, and for his merciful blessings upon the training they give (Genesis 17:18).

5. Commit their children to the hands of God (1 Samuel 1:24–28).

There is in Timothy's parents a display of God's marvelous providence and grace. Though his mother and grandmother were both believers, his father was an unbelieving Gentile. Eunice's marriage to him was an act of disobedience to God (Deuteronomy 7:3; 2 Corinthians 6:14). But providence took the sinful union of an unbelieving man and a believing woman and prepared a messenger of sovereign grace! As God overruled David's adultery with Bathsheba and gave them Solomon, so he overruled Eunice's disobedience and gave her Timothy. Thank God, he does not remember the sins of his people against them! Indeed, as John Trapp put it, "God can (and often does) turn our sins to our good and comfort." Like a wise physician, our Lord takes the most deadly poison and makes it a medicine for our health.

In the fullness of time Timothy was also prepared by grace for the work to which God had ordained him. He who preaches grace to others must first experience grace in his heart, and Timothy did. He was a devoted disciple of Christ, a man of blameless reputation in the community where he lived, and "well reported of by the brethren" (1 Timothy 3:7). It is apparent that Timothy was willing to serve God's cause in any capacity. That service which Mark despised as shameful, Timothy counted an honor (Acts 13:5; 15:38). God uses men like that!

Timothy was further prepared for the work of the gospel ministry by his willful submission to a man of proven faithfulness (v. 3). Before a man can lead men, he must learn to follow. Before Elisha could be a prophet he had to set at the feet of and serve the prophet Elijah. And before Timothy could be entrusted with the care of the churches he had to prove his care for the churches by serving Paul. He even submitted to the painful ordeal of circumcision, simply because Paul, God's faithful servant, said it would be best for the gospel's sake (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). Timothy was a man prepared by providence, grace, and obedience for the work of preaching the gospel.

A MESSAGE PROCLAIMED FROM GOD (v. 4)—That man who preaches by the Spirit of God is God's messenger, God's ambassador to men. He has a message from God and faithfully delivers it (2 Corinthians 5:18–21). They all have the same message, the gospel of Christ. And they are all to be heard, received, and treated as God's ambassadors. They constantly declare "the decrees" ordained of the apostles by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:11, 18): The Scriptures alone! Christ alone! Grace alone! All God's servants preach God's gospel: Ruin by the Fall, Redemption by the Blood, and Regeneration by the Holy Spirit. A Spirit filled ministry is a ministry characterized by the message of God's free and sovereign grace in Christ.

A MINISTRY PERFORMED BY GOD (v. 5). Paul and Silas went about preaching the gospel. They did not employ entertainers to make the gospel more appealing, have puppet shows to reach the children, host ball teams for the men, or organize bowling leagues for the women. They simply preached the gospel and waited for God to work, and he did (2 Corinthians 10:4–5). "Some were converted by their ministry, others confirmed. This is still the fruit of faithful preaching" (John Trapp). This much is certain: Anytime a man preaches the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit something happens for the glory of God (2 Corinthians 2:14–17).

A MESSENGER PROPELLED BY GOD (verses 6–8). Faithful gospel preachers are led, directed, motivated, and inspired in their work by the Holy Spirit. God's servants will not allow either their own desires or the influences of men to determine the course, place, or message of their ministry. Paul wanted to go to Asia, but the Holy Spirit would not allow it. He tried to go to Bithynia, but was providentially hindered. It was the purpose of God that the gospel be carried to Troas and then to Macedonia. There are some places in this world where God's servants are "forbidden of the Holy Spirit to preach the word." "This was a heavier judgment upon those coast," wrote Trapp, "than to be denied a harvest, or the light of the sun. Prize the preaching of the gospel as a singular privilege. They that are without a teaching priest are without God (2 Chronicles 15:3)." Blessed beyond measure are those people to whom God sends his servants to faithfully preach his Word (Amos 8:11–12; Isaiah 52:7).

45. THE MACEDONIAN CALL

Acts 16:6–13

After establishing the churches in Lystra and Derbe in the faith of the gospel, Paul and Silas went throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia preaching the grace of God in Christ. Paul wanted to carry the good news of redeeming, saving grace into Asia, but the Holy Spirit gave him no liberty to do so (v. 6). So he traveled on to Mysia and tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of God closed the door again (v. 7). Following the direction of God's providence and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Paul and his companions "came down to Troas" (v. 8). In the evening, as Paul was seeking God's direction for his ministry, a vision was given to him. By the special, supernatural revelation of God the Holy Spirit he saw a man from Macedonia standing before him, who said, "Come over into Macedonia, and help us" (v. 9).

Paul took this to be a call from God (v. 10). He had earnestly sought the will of God, and now he knew it. God had called him to preach the gospel to the perishing men and women of Macedonia. Immediately, he went to Philippi, the first city he could get to in Macedonia (verses 11–12). There he went to the place in that city where he was most likely to get a hearing and preached the gospel to a gathering of a few women (v. 13). Paul did not stop to do deputation work to raise money. He did not seek the approval or permission of a mission board. He knew that God had called him and trusted God both to provide for him and to make his labor effectual. It was his responsibility to preach the gospel to the perishing sinners of Macedonia. That was the one thing he knew he must do. He had to be obedient to the call of God (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Here is the Macedonian call—"Come over and help us." It is a call that has application to the church of God today. There is much for us to learn from this call and Paul's response to it about the evangelistic, missionary responsibilities of the church.

First, MEN AND WOMEN WHO DO NOT KNOW THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST ARE LOST, PERISHING IN IGNORANCE, UNDER THE WRATH OF GOD. The lost condition of perishing sinners is, to the people of God, a cry for help. This man of Macedonia represented a people who had everything imaginable in a natural sense. He represented a country and empire of incomparable greatness. Macedonia was the land of Philip, king of Macedonia and his son, Alexander the Great. This man represented the Greek world, the world of refinement, learning, wealth, and culture. The Greeks were also a very religious people. No one could question their devotion, fervency, and sincerity as religious people. They gave a great portion of their time, labor, and money to religious work and worship. They built the famous Parthenon in Athens and the great temple at Ephesus. In Athens alone the Greeks had 30,000 gods! When Paul saw their worship and devotion, he said, "I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious (religious)" (

Acts 17:22). The Greeks had every advantage socially and economically. Yet, like the rich young ruler, they lacked one thing. They had no knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. They were ignorant of soul-saving gospel truth. The lost condition of the refined Greeks demonstrates one fact with clarity—All who are ignorant of the gospel of Christ are lost, perishing in their sins under the wrath of God! The ignorant barbarian is lost (Romans 1:18–21). Our religious and irreligious relatives, neighbors, and friends who know not the Lord Jesus Christ are lost (Romans 10:1–17). Their lost condition is a cry for help. It is our responsibility to preach the gospel to them.

Secondly, THE GREATEST BLESSING GOD CAN EVER BESTOW UPON ANY PEOPLE IS TO SEND THEM A FAITHFUL GOSPEL PREACHER (Isaiah 52:7). The Holy Spirit would not let Paul go to Asia or Bithynia. But he sent him to Macedonia. What a blessing! There were some chosen sinners in Macedonia whom Christ had redeemed. The time had come when they must be called to life and faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel. "Ministers," wrote John Trapp, "are those by whom God helps his perishing people, and puts them out of the devil's danger. Hence they are called saviors (Obad. 21; 1 Timothy 4:16), redeemers (Job 33:24, 28), co-workers with Christ (2 Corinthians 6:1)."

God saves his elect through the instrumentality of gospel preaching. He who ordained the salvation of chosen sinners also ordained the means whereby it must be accomplished (Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23–25). Wherever an elect sinner is found, at the time appointed, a gospel preacher will be sent. One sign of God's anger, wrath, and displeasure upon reprobate men is that he sends them no gospel preacher, or that he withdraws from them the ministry of a faithful man (Hosea 4:17).

Thirdly, IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BELIEVERS, INDIVIDUALLY AND COLLECTIVELY AS LOCAL CHURCHES, TO PREACH THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST TO ETERNITY BOUND SINNERS (Mark 16:15–16). Every gospel preacher is responsible to keep the charge of God upon him (1 Timothy 4:12–16; 2 Timothy 4:1–5). Every local church must devote itself to the furtherance of the gospel (Matthew 28:18–20). And every believer must assume his responsibility to make the gospel of Christ known in his own generation. God has given you the light that you may show others the way. He has given you the message of his free and sovereign grace in Christ. It is your responsibility to get it out, to make it known in the generation in which you live. You cannot make anyone believe the gospel. That is not your responsibility. But you can see that they hear it. And that is your responsibility (Acts 1:8).

Fourthly, AS YOU ENDEAVOR TO MAKE THE GOSPEL KNOWN, SEEK AND SUBMIT TO THE DIRECTION OF GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT (verses 6–10). If you truly seek the will of God and wait upon the Lord that you may know how to serve him, he will show you his will (Proverbs 3:5–6). By the direction of his Word, the impulses of his Spirit, and the indications of his providence, God will make his will known to all who seek it. When God reveals his will to you, you will know it. And when you know you are doing the will of God you can do it with boldness, without fear of failure. If God is in the initiation of a thing, he will be in the execution of it, and he will see it through to its appointed end. Whether God shuts a door or opens a door, we must readily follow his direction.

Fifthly, GOD WILL BOTH DIRECT AND HONOR THE EFFORTS OF HIS PEOPLE FOR THE FURTHERANCE OF THE GOSPEL. God always honors those who honor him (1 Samuel 2:30). You do not labor in vain, if you seek to serve Christ (1 Corinthians 15:58). When Paul went to Macedonia he was thrown in jail, but God honored his labor in the saving of two precious souls, Lydia and the Philippian Jailor. His ministry there was a great success! He did exactly what God sent him there to do.

Be faithful to the work God has trusted to your hands, whatever it is. You will not fail. God is with you. His Word, which he sends out through you, will not return unto him void (Isaiah 55:11).

46. "A CERTAIN WOMAN NAMED LYDIA"

Acts 16:13–15

There were many women at Philippi, and several who gathered every Sabbath day for prayer by the riverside, but among the many there was "a certain woman named Lydia" who had been separated and distinguished from the rest by the grace of God. This "certain woman", who had been chosen by God and redeemed by Christ, must be regenerated by the Spirit and called to Christ. Before the world began the Lord God had appointed a time and a place for this woman's salvation. Now the time of mercy had come. The place grace had chosen was a riverside just outside the city of Philippi. Exactly at the time appointed, "the time of love" (Ezekiel 16:8), God brought Paul, his messenger of grace, to that little clearing by the riverside to preach the gospel to Lydia, "whose heart the Lord opened." This brief narrative of Lydia's conversion is here recorded by divine inspiration to teach us at least five things.

First, GRACE ALWAYS HAS ITS WAY! Salvation is by grace alone. That is stated so plainly and emphatically in the Scriptures that very few people openly deny it (Ephesians 2:8–9; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:3–5). However, there are few people in this world who understand the meaning of the word "grace", as it is used in the Bible. Grace is more than a divine attribute. It is a divine determination, a divine work, and a divine gift. It is not merely a desire in God's heart to save. It is the operation of God's arm, accomplishing salvation.

The grace of God is sovereign (Romans 9:16). God alone determined who he would save. His choice and election of some to eternal life was an act of his free, unconditional love (Jeremiah 31:3; Ephesians 1:3–4). Grace is never caused, dependent upon, or determined by man.

The grace of God is eternal (2 Timothy 1:9). The people to whom grace would come, the blessings grace would bring, and the works grace would accomplish were all determined by God before the worlds were made (Ephesians 1:11).

The grace of God is irresistible and effectual (Psalm 65:4; 110:3; Isaiah 46:9–13). "The marvel of God's grace is that it will not take ‘No' for an answer from some men" (Walter Chantry). Grace is more than divine goodness. It is the omnipotent power of divine goodness. Grace is not something God simply offers to sinners. It is something God performs in them!

The grace of God gives God alone all praise, honor, and glory for his saving operations (1 Corinthians 1:30–31). Grace attributes nothing to man but sin. Grace honors the triune God for salvation: The glorious Father, as the covenant keeping God of Heaven and earth; the gracious Son, as the Redeemer of his people, and the Holy Spirit as the Author of regeneration.

Grace is always on time (Ezekiel 16:6–8). At the time appointed when the chosen sinner must be saved, grace comes calling, creating life and faith, causing the dead sinner to come to Christ. No wonder the Psalmist sang, "Blessed is the man whom you chose and causes to approach unto you" (Psalm 65:4). Every saved sinner is a trophy of grace for the praise of God (Ephesians 2:7).

Second, DIVINE PROVIDENCE SOVEREIGNLY RULES ALL THINGS FOR THE SALVATION OF GOD'S ELECT. This lesson is demonstrated repeatedly, throughout the book of Acts. In the passage we are studying we see grace making its way to "a certain woman named Lydia". Grace marked out its object—Lydia! Grace set the time—A Certain Sabbath Day. Grace determined the place—A Riverside at Philippi. But how would Paul, the messenger of grace, and Lydia, the object of grace, be brought together at Philippi?

Paul was brought to Philippi by a very remarkable work of divine providence. His intentions were in another direction altogether, but God's intention was to bring him to Philippi. The strife with Barnabas caused him to go in one direction and Barnabas in another (15:36–41). Paul wanted to go to Asia. Lydia lived there, in Thyatira; but she was not at home at the time. So the Holy Spirit forbade Paul from going there. Then Paul tried to go to Bithynia, but, again, the Spirit of God would not allow it (verses 6–7). At last, he was called over into Macedonia, and the first city in his path was Philippi (verses 9–10). He must needs go through Philippi, because there were chosen sinners there for whom the time of grace had come. At exactly the same time, divine providence brought Lydia to Philippi. She had come on business, because God almighty was doing business for her! Ever trust and admire God's wise, adorable providence. Often we murmur because we look at our circumstances. May God teach us to look instead to his purpose and to trust it (John 17:2; Romans 8:28).

Third, THOSE WHO WALK IN THE LIGHT GOD GIVES THEM SHALL BE GIVEN MORE LIGHT. Salvation is by grace alone. Those sinners, and only those sinners, shall be saved whom the Father elected, the Son redeemed, and the Spirit calls (Romans 8:29–30). Yet, every person is responsible to obey the gospel. Here are three inescapable facts revealed in Holy Scripture: (1) All men are responsible to trust Christ (Acts 17:30); (2) No one will ever trust Christ unless God gives him faith (John 5:40; 6:44); and (3) Any sinner in all the world who will come to Christ may come to Christ, and coming to Christ shall be saved by Christ (John 6:37; Romans 10:13).

Lydia did not open her heart. That was the work of God alone. But she was not indifferent to her soul either. She did what she knew she should do. When she came to Philippi she sought out a people who sought to worship God, though they were but a band of women with no house of worship (v. 13). When Paul spoke the Word of God, she "attended unto the things which were spoken" (v. 14). Lydia was earnest about her soul. She sought the Lord, and seeking him she found him (Jeremiah 29:12–13). You would be wise to follow her example (

Proverbs 1:23–33).

Fourth, GOD USES FAITHFUL MEN FOR THE SALVATION OF HIS ELECT. As we have seen many times in the study of Acts, God's ordained means of grace to sinners is the preaching of the gospel (Romans 10:13–17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; 1 Timothy 4:16). Paul faithfully performed the work God had committed to him (1 Corinthians 4:1–7; 2 Corinthians 4:1–7). In all things he sought the will of God and labored for the glory of God. He did not seek anything for himself, but faithfully served Christ in the place where God put him, ministering to the people God entrusted to his care, and counted it his great privilege to do so (Ephesians 3:8).

Fifth, THE LORD GOD ALONE CAN OPEN THE HEARTS OF SINNERS. Providence brought Paul and Lydia together. Lydia came to the place of prayer, because she sought to worship God. But their meeting on the Sabbath day would have been a meaningless, insignificant exercise of religion except for one thing—The Lord was there! He was there working by his almighty, effectual, irresistible grace. Lydia was a woman "whose heart the Lord opened." He alone could. He who is the heart's Maker is the heart's Master. Christ alone holds the key to man's heart, knows how to put the key in, and opens the heart's door to let himself in! The Lord opened Lydia's heart to hear, understand, and believe the message of grace in the gospel. Her faith in Christ was manifest by two things (v. 15). (1) She obeyed Christ, confessing him in believer's baptism; and (2) She fell in love with those who served her soul (Isaiah 52:7). Grace made her generous and hospitable.

47. WHY WERE PAUL AND SILAS IMPRISONED?

Acts 16:16–40

Though they had done nothing at Philippi except preach the gospel of Christ and cast an unclean spirit out of a young woman, Paul and Silas were unjustly arrested, beaten, and publicly humiliated as common criminals. Why? Were they out of God's will? Had the Lord forsaken them? Was the angry mob out of God's control? Had Satan managed to thwart God's purpose? Nonsense! "Our God is in the heavens: he has done whatever he has pleased" (Psalm 115:3). Paul and Silas were arrested and thrown into prison at Philippi in violation of Roman law (verses 35–39), because the jailor in that prison was one of God's elect and the appointed time of mercy and love had come when he must be converted by the grace of God.

The first lesson taught and illustrated in this passage is one frequently set before us throughout the book of Acts: GOD SOVEREIGNLY RULES ALL THINGS FOR THE GOOD OF HIS ELECT (verses 16–24). There was an elect soul at the Philippi prison to whom Paul must preach the gospel. But their paths would never have crossed had God not sovereignly intervened to accomplish it. In order to accomplish his purpose of grace, God overruled the rantings of a demon possessed woman and the malice of an angry mob (Psalm 76:10; Romans 8:28).

God's servants refused the praise of a fortune teller (VERSES 16–18). Refusing to be associated with this satanic woman and her satanic religion, Paul turned and cast the demon out of her by the power of Christ. Three things need to be understood: (1) All forms of sorcery, witchcraft, and fortune telling are forbidden in the scriptures as satanic devices (Leviticus 19:26–31; 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:9–14; Isaiah 8:19; Malachi 3:5). (2) God's servants will not receive the praise and commendation of those who do not worship the Lord God. And (3) exorcism, like healing and the gift of tongues were apostolic gifts, confirming the apostles as God's messengers in the apostolic age (Hebrews 2:3–4). Those gifts are not active in the church today because they are no longer needed (1 Corinthians 13:10).

Even the wrath and wicked deeds of reprobate men accomplish the purpose of God (verses 19–24). Though the damsel spoke what Satan inspired her to speak and the men of the city did exactly what their anger and greed led them to do, God wisely and sovereignly used them to bring Paul to preach the gospel to a chosen sinner so that he might be saved (Psalm 76:10). Election determined who would be saved (Ephesians 1:3–6). Predestination determined all things for the accomplishment of God's gracious purpose (Ephesians 1:11). Providence is God's wise and orderly disposition of all things in the sovereign accomplishment of his purpose (Romans 8:28–30). As it is written, "All things are of God" (2 Corinthians 5:18).

The second thing we learn from this passage is the fact that FAITH IN CHRIST CAUSES BELIEVERS TO JOYFULLY SUBMIT TO THE WILL OF GOD (verses 25–28). Paul and Silas recognized that their imprisonment was as much the work of God as their daily provisions. Therefore, they were both confident and joyful. In the time of trouble they did not seek a Christian counselor, psychiatrist, or therapist. They did not become emotional wrecks. They believed God. Therefore they prayed. Happy are those souls who learn thus to deal with their troubles (Hebrews 4:15–16; 1 Peter 5:6–7).

Moreover, these men offered to God the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving in the midst of great trouble. They "sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them." Why shouldn't they? Believing God, they were full of joy. They knew their imprisonment was the will of God and that God's will is always good. Therefore they gave thanks (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). The believers joy is the joy of faith (Philippians 1:25). It is not circumstantial, but spiritual. It is a joy that glows in the dark.

The Lord has a way of assuring his tried and afflicted people that all is well, that he is upon his throne, and that he is with them. He graciously demonstrated his presence with and approval of Paul and Silas by a remarkable, providential intervention. He sent an earthquake that did no harm, but only good (v. 26). Immediately, Paul thought of his captor, whom he knew would most likely kill himself if his prisoners escaped (verses 26–27). What an example he was, even in great trial. In the midst of his trouble, Paul carefully sought the comfort and welfare of a man who was his enemy.

Thirdly, we are taught that GOD PROMISES ETERNAL SALVATION TO ALL WHO BELIEVE ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST (verses 29–34). The jailor cried, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Like all natural men, when seized with the fear of death and the wrath of God, this man thought he could and should do something to obtain God's salvation. Paul did not rebuke him for his error, but rather simply said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, and your house." Essentially, his words mean—"Man, you cannot do anything to be saved. You must trust Christ alone as your Lord and Savior. Believe on him and you shall be saved. And if the members of your family trust him, they too shall be saved!" Having made that declaration, Paul proceeded to instruct the chosen sinner and his household in the gospel of Christ (v. 32). Once they heard the message of grace and redemption in Christ, both the jailor and all his household were converted by the grace of God (verses 33–34). They all believed on Christ. They all confessed him in believer's baptism. They all rejoiced in God their Savior. And they all did what they could to comfort and assist the men who brought the message of grace to them.

Learn this too, THE ONLY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THOSE WHO BELIEVE AND THOSE WHO BELIEVE NOT IS THE DISTINGUISHING GRACE OF GOD (verses 35–39). The magistrates had seen the same things the jailor did. They felt the earthquake. They were filled with fear. But their hearts were unbroken. What made the difference between them and the jailor? Why did he believe God while they refused to believe? The answer is GRACE! (Read 1 Corinthians 4:7; 15:10). He was one of the Lord's sheep. They were not (John 10:25–27). Grace sought him out. Grace gave him life. Grace gave him faith. Grace made him a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The fifth lesson taught here is that THE BELIEVER'S TRIALS EQUIP HIM TO COMFORT OTHERS IN THEIR TIME OF TRIAL (v. 40). Paul and Silas gathered their brothers and sisters together to comfort them and strengthen their hearts in the faith. I am sure Paul told them what God had done, how that the Lord was with them in their trouble, and how grace had come to the jailor's house. Just before leaving them, the apostle must have urged them ever to cling to Christ and trust him, assuring them that no matter what their outward circumstances might be, all is well, eternally well, because God is accomplishing his purpose of grace (Romans 8:28–39).

48. "BELIEVING IN GOD WITH ALL HIS HOUSE"

Acts 16:30–34

The Philippian jailor said to Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" His concern was not how he could be saved from temporal death, but from spiritual and eternal death. He was moved not by the fear of Caesar, but by the fear of God. Fearing God and eternal death, he may have phrased his question as he did because he thought, (as all men do by nature), that he must do something to obtain God's salvation. But Paul and Silas answered with emphatic clarity and simplicity, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, and your house," teaching him and us that salvation is not by works, but by faith alone (Romans 3:20, 28; Ephesians 2:8–9; 2 Timothy 1:9).

WHAT MUST WE BELIEVE? Really the question is not "what", but "who must we believe?" Salvation does not come as the result of believing certain doctrines, no matter how true and necessary they are. Neither does salvation come by believing certain historical facts, no matter how vital those facts may be. Salvation comes to those who believe, who trust a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 1:12; 1 John 5:1). In order to believe on Christ a person must know the truth about Christ, as it is revealed in the gospel. But saving faith is more than mere agreement with or acceptance of revealed truth. It is believing a Person. It is trusting Christ himself (Isaiah 45:22). This is the way faith is represented to us throughout the Scriptures (

Matthew 16:16, 18; John 20:21; Acts 8:37; 1 John 5:10–13). "True faith is not barely a believing that Christ is the Son of God, but a believing in him as such" (John Gill). Saving faith is believing in Christ, the incarnate Son of God, as your all-sufficient, effectual, sin-atoning Substitute (2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24).

WHAT IS IT TO BELIEVE ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST? Men often make simple things difficult by trying to explain them. Certainly there is a danger of that when discussing faith. Yet, the word "believe", as it is used in the Bible, is not the same thing as men imagine it to be today. So some explanation is needed. For example, Webster's Dictionary defines believe like this—"To place credence, apart from personal knowledge; to expect or hope; to be more or less firmly persuaded of the truth of anything; to think or suppose." In that sense most people believe in Christ. Most believe that he lived in righteousness as a perfect man, that he died on the cross to save sinners, that he rose from the dead the third day, and that he ascended into Heaven. But that is not the meaning of the word believe as it is used in the Word of God. Actually, there is no single English word that can accurately translate the Greek word used in Acts 16:31 for believe. That word means "adhere to, cleave to, trust, have faith in, and rely upon." The apostle's words to the jailor might be more accurately translated, "Have an absolute, personal reliance upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved." The Amplified Version gives the sense of Paul's words most clearly—"Believe in and on the Lord Jesus Christ—That is, give yourself up to Him, take yourself out of your own keeping and entrust yourself to His keeping and you will be saved." Believing on Christ, faith in him, involves four things: knowledge, assent, trust, and perseverance.

1. KNOWLEDGE—No one can trust an unknown, unrevealed Savior. Before anyone can or will trust Christ, Christ must be made known to him by the preaching of the gospel (Romans 10:14–17). It is not possible for a person to believe on Christ until he has been informed about Christ, until he knows who Christ is, what he did, and why he did it. Faith is not a leap in the dark. Faith is based upon divine revelation. But there must be more.

2. ASSENT—Our hearts must give assent to God's revelation. There is no faith until the heart is reconciled to and in agreement with the truth of God revealed in Holy Scripture. We must be reconciled to God and his revelation concerning the vital issues of salvation: sin, righteousness, and judgment (2 Corinthians 5:20; John 16:8–11). Still, there is more.

3. TRUST—Saving faith is believing in, relying upon, trusting Christ. It is a heart confidence in the Son of God. This trust, this confidence is what Paul expressed in his last Epistle (2 Timothy 1:12; 4:6–8). To trust Christ is to confidently rest your soul upon his righteousness, his atonement, his intercession, his grace, and his dominion as your Lord and Savior. But faith in Christ is not an act. It involves …

4. PERSEVERANCE—Faith is not an event in life. It is the character of the believer's life. The just live by faith. The believer never quits trusting Christ. Every child of God, like the saints of old, shall "die in faith" (Hebrews 11:13). Faith that does not persevere to the end is a false faith.

It is the very simplicity and easiness of faith that makes it so difficult for proud sinners to be saved. God says, "Believe and live." But proud man says, "No, I will do something. I will not be saved entirely by the grace of God. I will not entirely trust my soul upon the merits of Christ." Yet, there is no other way to be saved! Sinners are saved by simply trusting Christ, the Son of God, by committing themselves to the merit and power of the Substitute who lived, died, and lives again for sinners. Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone is so humbling to proud, self-righteous man that no man can or will trust Christ unless and until God the Holy Spirit gives him life and creates faith in him. Yes, faith in Christ is the gift of God (Ephesians 1:19; 2:8–9; Philippians 1:29; Co. 2:12).

WHAT IS THAT SALVATION WHICH COMES TO SINNERS BY FAITH IN CHRIST? It is complete deliverance from all sin and all the consequences of sin by the grace of God and through the merits of Christ's righteousness and shed blood as our Substitute (John 3:18, 36; Romans 8:1; 1 John 5:10–13). To be saved is to be delivered from death to life, from the bondage of sin to the liberty of righteousness, from the tyranny of the law to the blessedness of grace, and at last into "the glorious liberty of the sons of God."

One more question naturally arises as we read Acts 16, and needs to be answered. DOES THIS PASSAGE TEACH HOUSEHOLD SALVATION? (Read verses 31–34). The grace of God does not run in blood lines, and it is not possible for parents to secure faith for their sons and daughters. Many truly godly men, like David, have gone to their graves knowing that their sons and daughters lived and died as rebels against God (2 Samuel 23:5). Salvation is by the will and purpose of God (John 1:12–13; Romans 9:16). Faith is the gift of his grace. The Philippian jailor was saved because he believed God. All who were in his house were saved because they too believed God. As soon as the jailor heard and believed the gospel of Christ, he brought Paul and Silas upstairs to his house. He gathered his wife, children, and servants around his table in the middle of the night, and arranged for them to hear the message of grace too. When they heard, they also believed, and all immediately confessed Christ in believer's baptism.

Every believing parent is responsible to do for his household what the jailor did for his. IF WE WOULD SEE OUR FAMILIES SAVED BY THE GRACE OF GOD, WE MUST SEE THAT OUR FAMILIES HEAR THE GOSPEL PREACHED. That much we are responsible to do. That much we can do. That much we must do! But the salvation of our households is entirely dependent upon and determined by the will and grace of our God.

49. THREE WEEKS IN THESSALONICA

Acts 17:1–10

Acts 16 closes with Paul and Silas quietly departing from Philippi. The magistrates there were politically embarrassed when they found out that Paul and Silas, whom they had beaten and imprisoned, were Roman citizens. Had they chosen to do so, Paul and Silas could have caused them much trouble legally and politically. But after receiving public apology they left town quietly, once they had visited and comforted Lydia, the first European convert, and the brethren (16:39–40). Philippi would never be the same. God had graciously saved two households in that city. The households of Lydia and the jailor formed the gospel church at Philippi. They had the responsibility now of continuing and propagating the faith of Christ. They must have assumed their responsibility with great zeal, because soon there was a strong, flourishing church there.

The missionary trio (Paul, Silas, and Timothy) walked through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica, one of Macedonia's most populous and important cities. In all they walked about 100 miles to get to Thessalonica, apparently spending two nights on the road (v. 1). When they got to Thessalonica they engaged in intensive evangelism, preaching in the Jewish synagogue there for three weeks in a row, every Sabbath day (v. 2). Traditionally, traveling rabbis were invited to speak at local synagogues as a matter of courtesy when visiting an area. Apparently, Paul was asked to speak for that reason. He was obviously well received.

PAUL'S METHOD OF PREACHING WAS BOTH INTERESTING AND INSTRUCTIVE (verses 2–3). Paul was wise enough to adapt himself to his circumstances and to the needs of the hour. Sometimes he stood before an assembly and preached lengthy discourses (Acts 13:16–41). But there are other methods of preaching. At Thessalonica we are told that his preaching included three things: (1) He reasoned with them out of the Scriptures; (2) He opened, or explained the message of the Scriptures; and (3) He alleged that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. Paul's first technique in preaching was REASONING. The word translated "reason" here is the word from which we get the English word "dialog". It has the idea of give and take conversation. The sense of Luke's words is—Using the Old Testament, with which the Jews were thoroughly familiar, Paul reasoned with them. He listened to their arguments and patiently refuted them by the Word of God. His second tactic was OPENING, or explaining the Word of God. The word that is translated "opening" is very strong. It means "to expand" or "to force open". When the Scriptures were read, Paul opened up and explained their meaning. That is what preaching is. It is opening the Scriptures, and thus opening the understanding of one's hearers to see that all the Scriptures speak of Christ's sufferings, death, and resurrection glory (Luke 24:27, 44–47). Thirdly, the apostle's method in preaching was ALLEGING. He alleged, or proved from the Old Testament Scriptures the necessity of Christ's sin-atoning death and triumphant resurrection. This word, "allege" means "to put along side". In preaching at Thessalonica Paul compared spiritual things with spiritual (1 Corinthians 2:13). He took a text from Isaiah and compared it with a text from Daniel, and put alongside of them some passages from the Psalms or one of the other prophets. Thus alleging, or proving from the Word of God the necessity of Christ's redemptive work.

SOME BELIEVED AND SOME BELIEVED NOT (verses 4–9). Wherever Christ comes, and wherever he is faithfully preached there is a division because of him (John 7:43). The preaching of the gospel humbles some and brings them to repentance and hardens others (2 Corinthians 2:14–16). The difference between those who believe and those who believe not is the distinguishing grace of God (1 Corinthians 4:7). Some of the Jews, many of the Gentiles, and several women, being chosen, redeemed, and called by the grace of God were persuaded by Paul's doctrine and identified themselves with Christ and his servants (v. 4). However, those who believed not were by no means indifferent. Not only did they not believe the gospel, they set themselves in opposition to it. How often this is repeated! Unbelief hardens into resentment, and resentment breaks out in malicious abuse. The unbelieving Jews apparently had connections with the criminal element in the city. They hired some street thugs to stir up trouble and assault the house of Jason, where Paul, Silas, and Timothy were staying (v. 5). This stirring of violence and slander was caused by religious, churchgoing people. When they could not refute the doctrine of Christ and would not give up their false religion, their hearts, filled with hatred for God and his gospel, erupted in cruel and vicious attacks upon God's messengers. Any preacher who has preached free grace to a congregation of freewill, works religionists, knows exactly what happened at Thessalonica! The malicious mob did not find the preachers at home, so they arrested Jason and some of the brethren because of their association with God's servants. Deliberately twisting Paul's words and his doctrines, they accused the saints of God of insurrection and riotousness, as promoters of evil things (verses 6–8). Since the days of our Lord, this has been the common tactic of religious men against Christ and the gospel of his grace (

Luke 23:2; John 19:12; Romans 3:8). Jason and the brethren were released after making bail (v. 9). To avoid further trouble for Jason and the young believers at Thessalonica, Paul, Silas, and Timothy slipped out of town undercover of darkness and went to Berea (v. 10).

THE CHARGE MADE AGAINST GOD'S CHURCH BY HER ENEMIES WAS A CHARGE THAT GREATLY HONORED IT. The mob cried out against Paul, Silas, Timothy, and the believing men and women at Thessalonica, "These have turned the world upside down" (v. 6). Would to God the church today had a reputation for turning the world upside down! Instead, the church today has made peace with the world, walks hand in hand with the world, and has married the world. Fire and zeal for the glory of God have been drowned in the flood of compromise and conciliation. Instead of setting the world on fire with the truth of God, the church today warms itself with the fires of the world, fires fueled by burning God's truth! The church of our day has betrayed Christ, betrayed the souls of men, and betrayed the gospel of the grace of God. All has been sold for the silver of praise, popularity, and worldly recognition!

THE CHURCH TODAY NEEDS SOME MEN WHO WILL, WITH THE REASON, FORCE, AND PERSUASION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE, PREACH THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST, AS PAUL DID IN THE SYNAGOGUE AT THESSALONICA. The basis of Paul's appeal to men was the Word of God alone. He reasoned with his hearers out of the Scriptures (v. 2). The Bible is the only source of divine truth in this world. God's preachers appeal to no other authority (Isaiah 8:20; 2 Timothy 3:16–17). The message Paul preached was Jesus Christ and him crucified (v. 3; 1 Corinthians 2:2). He showed from the Word of God the necessity of Christ's substitutionary death. According to the Word of God four things necessitated Christ's death on the cross: (1) God's Decree (1 Peter 1:18–20; Acts 2:23); (2) Christ's Voluntary, Suretyship Engagements (Isaiah 50:5–7; John 10:16–18; 12:27–28); (3) The Old Testament Prophets (Mark 14:49; Luke 24:44); and (4) The Justice of God (Romans 3:24–26; Galatians 3:21). Paul boldly pressed upon his hearers the claims of Christ the King, demanding immediate and total surrender to him as Lord. Blessed are the people to whom God sends such a preacher!

50. THOSE NOBLE BEREANS

Acts 17:10–15

Unlike so many at Thessalonica, when the people at Berea heard Paul preach the gospel they profited from the Word. The Bereans did not go to church half asleep, or with their minds wandering in a thousand directions. When they went to the house of worship, they went seeking a word from God for their souls. They listened attentively, turned to the passages cited, compared scripture with scripture, and received that which was taught from the Word of God with readiness of mind. The Bereans were determined to know the truth of God. It appears that everyone of them came to church with pencil and paper in hand. As Paul preached they took down the notes needed to fix his doctrine in their minds. When they went home, they searched the Scriptures.

The Holy Spirit holds these Bereans before us as examples to follow. If you would receive spiritual good for your soul by the preaching of the gospel, you would be wise to hear the Word attentively, as the Bereans did.

PAUL AND SILAS WERE SENT BY GOD TO BEREA WITH A MESSAGE TO DECLARE (v. 10). By one means or another God always brings the messenger of mercy and the object of mercy together at the appointed time. Paul was sent to Philippi by a supernatural vision in the night because the time had come for the Lord to open Lydia's heart. The apostle was beaten and imprisoned at Philippi because the time had come for the jailor and his household to be saved. The officials at Philippi pleaded with Paul and Silas to leave their town because the time had come when God would save some elect Thessalonians. Paul was driven from Thessalonica to Berea by persecution because there were many at Berea to whom God was determined to be gracious. The eye of faith sees the overruling hand of divine providence using the wicked deeds of men to move God's servant to the place where God wanted him (Psalm 76:10). "The devil was out shot in his own bow," Matthew Henry wrote. "He thought by persecuting the apostles to stop the progress of the gospel, but it was so overruled as to be made to further it."

Paul and Silas came to Berea as messengers commissioned by God. Knowing that God had sent him to preach the gospel at Berea, as soon as he got in town Paul found the local synagogue and began preaching! He was God's ambassador and he knew it (Matthew 10:40; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20). As such, he had a message from God and boldly delivered it (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Corinthians 2:2). God's ambassadors all faithfully deliver the message God has given them, the message of free and gracious salvation through the obedience and death of the sinners' Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will not alter or trim his message for any reason. God sent Paul and Silas to Berea at the appointed time of mercy for the calling of chosen sinners. As we shall see in verse 11, grace had gone before them and had prepared the way for grace, for there were some chosen sinners at Berea seeking the Lord. These three things are certain: (1) Wherever there is a sinner seeking the Savior, there is the Savior seeking a sinner. (2) Wherever there is a sinner seeking light, there will be a gospel preacher bringing light. (3) Wherever there is a sinner seeking grace, grace has begun its work. No sinner will ever seek the Lord until grace causes him to do so (Romans 3:11).

When Paul and Silas came preaching the gospel THE BEREANS RECEIVED THE WORD OF GOD WITH ALL READINESS OF MIND (v. 11). There is nothing more delightful to a preacher than the privilege of preaching the gospel of Christ to people who are ready and anxious to hear it (Acts 10:33). Like Cornelius and his household, the Bereans had been prepared by God to receive his Word. Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit to tell us three things about them.

1. The Bereans were more noble than the Jews of Thessalonica. This was not a reference to their social status! Luke's reference is to their attitude toward the Word of God and the preaching of the gospel. The Bereans reverenced the Old Testament Scriptures as the Word of God and that as the only source of Divine truth (Isaiah 8:20). Their minds were not hardened against the Word by their religious customs, doctrinal traditions, and philosophical opinions. They were open to anything taught in the Scriptures. Our minds must always be open to "Thus says the Lord," and completely closed to all else. When the Bereans came to church, they came with the hope of hearing from God. They reverenced the worship of God and the ministry of the Word as God's ordained means of doing their souls eternal good (Ecclesiastes 5:1–2; 1 Corinthians 1:21; Ephesians 4:11–14; James 1:17–19).

2. The Bereans received the Word of God with all readiness of mind. "This more noble disposition of mind and conduct was owing to the grace of God bestowed upon them" (John Gill). Blessed is the soul God causes to hunger, for he shall be filled. Blessed are those God causes to thirst, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed is the sinner God causes to seek, for he shall find. Notice, "They received the Word!" They did not ignore the Word. They did not find fault with the preacher. They did not argue with the Word. "They received the Word!"

3. They searched the Scriptures. As Paul reasoned with them out of the Scriptures the Bereans followed along, taking notes. When they got home, they searched the Scriptures daily, to see if Paul's doctrine was according to the Word of God. All who care for their souls should do the same (John 5:39; 1 John 4:1). The gospel of Christ will bear scrutiny and examination. God's servants want their hearers to examine what they preach and teach by the Scriptures.

"THEREFORE MANY OF THEM BELIEVED" (v. 12). The word "therefore" is important. It refers back to verse 11. As a direct result of the diligent use of the means at their disposal, God gave the Bereans faith and salvation in Christ. It is written, "Seek and you shall find!" God promises to be found by all who seek him (Jeremiah 29:13; Lamentations 3:25). No one ever yet sought the Lord in vain! Many of the Jews believed. Many of the Gentile women believed. And they, as faithful witnesses, persuaded their husbands to believe (1 Corinthians 7:16). Grace prepared the way! Grace brought the word of grace. And grace gave faith.

Yet, in verses 13–15, we are reminded that THE OFFENSE OF THE CROSS HAS NOT CEASED OR EVEN DIMINISHED. Though many believed, (the many who were chosen, redeemed, and called by the grace of God), many were offended. Persecution again broke out, forcing Paul to leave Berea too. Learn these four things from this brief history of the gospel at Berea.

1. To them who are called, to God's elect, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:15–16; 1 Corinthians 1:21–23). There is no need for compromise. The message we preach is God's means of grace to his people. To compromise the message is to destroy the means.

2. To the unbeliever the gospel of Christ is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence (1 Peter 2:7–8). It is not possible to make Divine truth palatable to natural men. The only way God's ambassador can deal with his enemies is to confront them and demand surrender on God's terms.

3. Any preacher, or any church, that faithfully preaches the gospel of God's free and sovereign grace in Christ will suffer for it (Matthew 10:16–34). The world will never embrace those who faithfully declare the truth of God.

4. However, our God, the God we trust and serve, is still on his throne. Nothing should deter us in serving our God. He will arrange even the persecutions of our most implacable foes to do us good, to further his cause, and to increase his kingdom (Romans 8:28).

51. "THE UNKNOWN GOD"

Acts 17:16–34

Because of the uproar in Berea and the threat of persecution there, certain of the Berean brethren escorted Paul safely to Athens. Luke was left behind in Philippi, Timothy in Thessalonica to minister to the new converts there, and Silas stayed in Berea where he was later joined by Timothy. They were all to meet in Athens and from there continue their missionary travels. In verse 16 we find Paul waiting for his fellow laborers.

The Apostle of Christ was alone in the city of Athens, the cultural, educational, philosophical center of the Gentile world. Walking through the streets of the city, his spirit was stirred with both anger and compassion, as he beheld "the city wholly given to idolatry" (v. 16). In the city of Athens it was easier to find a God than a man! Everywhere, down every street, in every corner, wherever a nook was found there was a statue of some pagan God or goddess. Someone estimated that there were more than 30,000 gods in Athens! With his soul on fire and his heart bursting with the message of free salvation by the grace of God in Christ, Paul went into the synagogue, into the streets, and into the market place, preaching "Jesus and the resurrection." He preached that Jesus Christ is the one true and living God, incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and exalted (Colossians 1:12–20; 2:9–10; Hebrews 1:1–3), the only God and Savior of men. He preached the resurrection of the dead as a matter of certainty (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; 1 Corinthians 15:50–58), declaring that there is a day appointed when all people must meet the Lord Jesus Christ in judgment (2 Corinthians 5:10–11), to be rewarded by him with eternal life or eternal death upon the grounds of strict justice (Rev. 20:11–12).

Paul spoke plainly and distinctly. Soon the whole city was talking about this strange preacher, his strange message, and the "strange gods" he preached. The controversy got so hot that Paul was brought to Areopagus, Mars' Hill, for trial (verses 17–23). Mars' Hill was the highest court of the Athenians. This was the place where Socrates had been condemned for turning the people against their gods. Like a bold gladiator in an arena of lions, Paul stepped forward in the name of God, for the glory of Christ, to do battle with the powers of darkness. His only weapon was the Word of God. But that was enough! The man of God boldly declared the Lord Jesus Christ, "THE UNKNOWN GOD", to the assembled pagans at Mars' Hill, without thought of cost or consequence. May God raise up such men to speak for him today!

Note: The Apostle took the Athenians idolatrous inscription "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD", and applied it to the true and living God with good reason. Though the Lord God has plainly revealed himself in his Word and in the Person and work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the one true and living God is yet unknown to most people.

A STERN CONDEMNATION (verses 22–23)—Most of the commentators in recent times have tried to tone down the language Paul used to make it less condemning, suggesting, "It would not be in order for an invited speaker to insult such an august body." But there is no way to honestly translate Paul's language into conciliatory words. It was Paul's intention to condemn the idolatry of the men. When he stood before this august body, the Apostle sternly condemned the learned, philosophical religious customs of the Athenians as foolish idolatry.

Human religion takes on many forms. It is always very tolerant and compromising, so that almost anything is acceptable as a religious practice or doctrine. The only thing that is always offensive to religious men and women is the plain declaration of the fact that salvation is by the free and sovereign grace of God alone, through the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only sin-atoning Substitute for sinners. This is the doctrine of the Bible (Psalm 37:39; Isaiah 53:1–12; Jonah 2:9; Romans 3:24–28; Ephesians 2:8–9; 2 Timothy 1:9). Any doctrine that is contrary to this message is a false gospel, damning to the souls of men and idolatrous (Galatians 1:6–9). But this gospel, the message of salvation by grace through the merits of the crucified Substitute, is offensive to men (Galatians 5:11).

Paul spoke plainly. He did not come to Mars' Hill to play patty cake. He came to lay the axe to the root of the tree; and he did. His opening words were an unflinching condemnation of idolatry—"I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious," literally, "too religious!" Though the Athenians had over 30,000 gods to whom they gave homage, only three religious groups are mentioned in this chapter. Those three groups essentially embrace the tenets of all false religion.

THE JEWS worship Jehovah, the one true and living God. They keep the religious practices of the Mosaic law. They live by the rule of the ten commandments. Their religion requires them to be morally upright. They refuse to worship graven images. But their religion is a vain pretense and an idolatrous substitute for Divine worship. They reject the revelation of God concerning his Son, refuse to be saved by the merits of the crucified, risen, exalted Son of God, refuse to bow to Christ the Lord, and refuse to be saved by grace alone. Christ is the Door. He is the Way (John 10:9; 14:6). There is no other. To reject him is to choose idolatry!

THE EPICUREANS were a band of philosophical liberals. They did admit God's Being, or some sort of a god's being. But they thought God was somewhat like themselves, good but not great, gracious but not glorious. They denied creation and the resurrection. The Epicureans lived for pleasure.

THE STOICS were philosophical conservatives. They believed in creation by God, some God. They believed in the resurrection of the body. They taught moral virtue. They believed in the power of the human will, and of course denied God's sovereign rule of the world. The people of Athens, all three groups, were very religious and very lost. Though they called him a "babbler", a nit-picker, for doing so Paul told them their religion was a dark, damning delusion.

A STUBBORN CONFRONTATION (verses 24–29)—The Apostle confronted the men of Athens with the claims of God's character at the very points where they were most rebellious. He declared four things about the character of God that are essential to true worship.

1. God is the Creator and Original Source of all things (v. 24; Romans 11:36).

2. God is absolutely sovereign over all things (v. 24; Daniel 4:35–37).

3. God is Spirit (v. 25). He requires that we worship him in spirit and in truth. He has no regard for imaginary, idolatrous, "holy things" or "holy places" (John 4:23–24; Isaiah 1:10–14).

4. God sovereignly rules and disposes of all men according to his own purpose in predestination (verses 26–29).

A STRAIGHTFORWARD COMMAND (verses 30–31)—When Paul says, "The times of this ignorance God winked at," his meaning is, "In ages past God passed over the Gentiles in judgment, but now, in this gospel age, he commands all men everywhere to trust his Son," before whom all men must soon stand in judgment.

A SOLEMN CONCLUSION (verses 32–34)—When the message was finished and the day was over "some mocked". Some hesitated, wavering in indecision and unbelief, they lost the opportunity they had. They never heard God's servant again! But there were some who believed the gospel (v. 34). When Paul's work at Athens was done, he left and went to Corinth, confident of God's blessing upon the message he preached (2 Corinthians 2:14–17).

52. GOD, MAN, AND THE DAY OF JUDGMENT

Acts 17:24–31

In these verses the Apostle Paul describes the character of the only true and living God and the responsibility of men before him. Obviously, he does not tell us everything about God's character. The infinite God can never be fully known by finite man. But the Apostle's purpose in this passage is to distinguish God from all the false gods worshiped by men. He does this by declaring seven things.

1. THE LORD OUR GOD IS THE SOVEREIGN CREATOR AND RULER OF ALL THINGS (v. 24). He who created all things owns all things, rules all things, and disposes of all things as he will (Matthew 20:15; Psalm 15:3; 135:6; Daniel 4:34–35; Romans 11:36). Everything and everyone in the universe is absolutely governed by God for the accomplishment of his will (Ephesians 1:11; Isaiah 45:7; Proverbs 16:4).

2. THE HOLY LORD GOD CANNOT BE ENSHRINED IN TEMPLES OR WORSHIPED BY PHYSICAL ACTS OR OBJECTS (verses 24–25). God is Spirit. All who worship him must worship him in Spirit and in truth (John 4:24; Philippians 3:3). It is true, in the Old Testament, God did establish his worship in the tabernacle and later in the temple at Jerusalem. However, like the sacrifices, the priesthood, and the laws of Israel, temple worship was a temporary, carnal ordinance designed to portray what Christ would do for the redemption and salvation of his people. Now that he has finished his work, the carnal ordinances have been abolished forever (Colossians 2:8–23; Hebrews 10:1–14). Any worship of God in "holy places", the use of images, icons, or crosses is nothing less than idolatry (v. 29). All true worship is spiritual worship.

3. GOD ALMIGHTY, FROM ETERNITY, DETERMINED ALL THINGS REGARDING THE LIVES OF ALL PEOPLE UPON THE EARTH (v. 26). Before the world was made he determined that all men would spring from one man, our father Adam. He "has made of one blood all nations of men." All the races of men in the world have their origin in one man. In reality we are not many races, but one race with many distinguishing traits. This verse also declares that God determined the time and place of every man's birth, the length of his life, the space which each would occupy upon the earth, and the time and means of every man's death (Job 7:1). Fully recognizing the responsibility of all men to properly take care of their health, it must be understood that the most careful shall not extend his life and the most careless shall not shorten his life by so much as a tithe of a second. Our times are in God's hands!

4. IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO SEEK THE LORD IN THE TIME HE HAS ALLOTTED US (v. 27). Every person has one life to live, one death to die, one judgment to face, and one eternity to spend. If we hope to spend eternity in the bliss of God's eternal glory, we must seek him now, while we have both the opportunity and the ability to do so. "Seek you the Lord while he may be found, call you upon him while he is near" (Isaiah 5:6). "The Lord is good to the soul that seeks him" (Lamentations 3:25).

5. THE LORD GOD IS NEAR EVERY ONE OF US (v. 27–28). The Lord God is omnipresent, everywhere present at one time, in all the fullness of his glorious, triune Being! God is the infinite Spirit. He has no limitations. He is near us all, believers and unbelievers, so near us that "in him we live, and move, and have our being" (See Psalm 139:7–12). Augustine wrote, "God is an infinite circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere!" Nothing is more serious and sobering than the realization that we are always in the presence of God! When our father Adam rebelled against God and died spiritually, we died in him, because we sinned in him (Romans 5:12). This spiritual death is the separation of our souls from God. Because man is far off from God, he imagines that God is far off from him; but it is not so. The living God is "not far from every one of us: for in him we live, and move, and have our being." God is everywhere! He is so fully present in all places that he is especially near to every person on earth. God is as much with you as if there were no other persons in the universe but you and God! Yet, his being near you does not make him far off from anyone else. God is so near to every person that he observes us with exactness. He clearly perceives the inmost, secret thoughts and intents of every heart. He feels for us. He thinks of us. He is near us in all the power of omnipotence, ready to intervene and help us. He is near us in all places and at all times. By day and by night he surrounds us. Understand Paul's words and be filled with awe—"He is not far from every one of us: for in him we live, and move, and have our being."

This is a matter of great assurance and peace to the believer. "The Lord is at hand" (Philippians 4:4). He is near to preserve us in trial, to protect us from danger and to provide for our every need. He is near to hear our prayers and answer them, to commune with us and make himself known to us, and to renew and revive us with his grace. As the fish finds all it needs in the pond, so the believer finds all he needs in Christ, in whom we live, and move, and have our being. If the Lord is near, then all is well (2 Timothy 4:9–18).

This is a matter of great encouragement to those who know their need of Christ and seek him. Paul's argument is—The Lord is near everyone of us so that all who seek him may feel after him and find him (verses 27–28). If the Lord is near and you seek him, you will surely find him (Romans 10:6–10; Jeremiah 29:13). If you seek him, you may be assured of the fact that he is seeking you. Otherwise, you would never seek him. And when the sinner seeks God and God seeks the sinner, the two will soon come together! The Lord is near to save, to pardon, and to justify all who seek him.

This is a word of warning to every rebel. "He be not far from every one of us." All sin, all rebellion, all unbelief is committed in the immediate presence of the holy Lord God! It is impossible for any sinner to escape the wrath of God, who is near to everyone of us, except by taking refuge in Christ, who is himself the omnipresent God.

6. GOD COMMANDS ALL MEN EVERYWHERE TO REPENT (v. 30). When Paul says that God "winked at" the ignorance, idolatry, and unbelief of the Gentiles in ages past, he does not mean that God ignored it, or did not notice it, or excused it. He means, in those days God passed by the Gentile nations in judgment and revealed himself only to the children of Israel. But now, in this gospel age, God "commands all men everywhere to repent." Because it is the commandment of God, it is also the duty of all men to repent of their sins and trust the Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 3:23; Ezekiel 36:31). All who obey the command of the gospel shall be saved. All who refuse to obey shall be damned (Proverbs 1:22–33).

7. AT THE DAY APPOINTED GOD WILL JUDGE ALL MEN IN RIGHTEOUSNESS BY THE GOD-MAN JESUS CHRIST (John 5:28; 2 Corinthians 5:10–11; Rev. 20:11–15). The day of judgment will be the day of settling. In that great day everyone will receive exactly what justice demands, exactly what he lawfully deserves. When the books are opened and each person is examined by the omniscient eye of strict justice, the unbelieving, standing before God without a Substitute, will be rewarded with everlasting wrath, in exact proportion to their measure of wickedness. The redeemed, being totally free from sin and perfectly righteous in Christ their Substitute, shall inherit all the fullness of heaven's glory, because justice declares they are worthy!

53. PAUL'S MINISTRY AT CORINTH

Acts 18:1–11

Corinth was a large seaport city. It was the commercial meeting place of the East and the West. On one side of the city there was a port to the Ionian Sea, on the other side a port to the Aegean Sea. As Athens was the intellectual center of the ancient Greek world, Corinth was the economic center. It was famous for its spectacular bronze and infamous for its sensuality. In the temple of Venus at Corinth there were over 1000 prostitutes to be hired by the many travelers who passed through the city. It was to this materialistic, idolatrous, perverse city that Paul came preaching the gospel of Christ. Timothy and Silas were still in Macedonia. Paul came to Corinth alone. He had no companion, but his Heavenly Companion. He had no friend with him, but the Friend of Sinners whom he had come to proclaim. In these eleven verses the Spirit of God teaches us six very important lessons.

1. GOD'S SERVANTS ARE NOT HIRELINGS (verses 1–4). Though trained as a scholar at the feet of Gamaliel, and though he was an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, when Paul came to Corinth to preach the gospel he earned his living by making tents. Aquila and Priscilla were Jewish believers who were also tent makers. They received Paul into their home and into their business. Tent making at the time was a common trade. Yet, it was a noble trade. As Matthew Henry wrote, "An honest trade, by which a man may get his bread, is not to be looked upon by any with contempt." Why did Paul work as a tent maker? Many point to Paul as an excuse for being stingy with God's servants, suggesting that those who preach the gospel should not live by the gospel. Such an attitude is contrary to the plain teachings of the New Testament. God has ordained that every man who faithfully labors in the work of the gospel ministry should live by the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:6–14; Galatians 6:6; 1 Timothy 5:17). Individual believers, deacons, and local churches should make it their business to see to it that those men who faithfully preach the gospel (pastors, missionaries, evangelists) lack for nothing materially. Those who give themselves to the work of the ministry are worthy of financial support. They should never have to ask for anything. In a local church deacons should make certain that the pastor has no earthly, material concern, so that he may give himself entirely to study, prayer, and preaching (Acts 6:2–4). Paul made tents at Corinth because there was no church established among the Corinthians to maintain him. The churches at Jerusalem and Antioch should have assumed that responsibility, but for some reason did not; and Paul refused to ask for help. Being the servant of God, he would not stoop to begging for the help of men! And rather than give the appearance of greed, the Apostle chose to labor with his hands while he preached the gospel to the unbelieving (2 Corinthians 11:7–8; 2 Thessalonians 3:8–9). However, once they were converted, Paul clearly taught the Corinthian believers to generously support those who preached the gospel (1 Corinthians 9; 2 Corinthians 8 and 9).

Though he labored with his hands through the week, Paul preached the gospel freely to the Jews every Sabbath day. He reasoned with them from the Old Testament Scriptures, showing that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ (verses 4–5; Genesis 49:10; Deuteronomy 18:15; Psalm 132:11; Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; 53:1–12; Jeremiah 23:5–6).

2. FAITHFUL MEN NEED THE FELLOWSHIP AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF OTHER FAITHFUL MEN. Paul seems to have gotten a little discouraged; but when Timothy and Silas finally arrived at Corinth (v. 5), they seem to have given him the boost he needed. The fact is, we all need other people. Pastors need one another's encouragement. Believers need one another's encouragement. We should always strengthen one another's arms in the service of Christ.

3. THE GREATEST CURSE GOD CAN EVER BRING UPON ANY PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD IS TO REMOVE FROM THEM THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL. That is what is described in verse 6. Because the Jews willfully rejected the counsel of God against themselves, God took his counsel from them and sent his Word to the Gentiles (Matthew 22:8–9; 23:37–38; Romans 11:22). What a warning is here given! Those who trifle with and oppose the gospel of Christ court divine reprobation (Proverbs 1:22–33). Those who oppose God's messengers oppose God (Matthew 10:40). All who despise and reject the gospel of Christ bring ruin upon themselves. Their damnation will be their own fault. Their blood will be upon their own heads (Acts 20:26; Ezekiel 33:8–9).

4. THE GREATEST BLESSING GOD CAN EVER BESTOW UPON ANY PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD IS TO SEND THEM A MAN WHO WILL FAITHFULLY PREACH THE GOSPEL OF HIS FREE AND SOVEREIGN GRACE IN CHRIST TO THEM (verses 7–8). The Jews despised Paul's message and despised him for preaching it. But there was a man named Justus who opened his house to Paul and turned it into a preaching center. The fact is, all who love the gospel, love those who preach it and do what they can to accommodate it. Paul had seen little response to his message at Athens and had met with great opposition at Corinth, but he was faithful. God always honors faithfulness (

1 Samuel 2:30). At the time appointed, God began calling out his elect at Corinth: first Justus; then Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue; then his household; then many of the Corinthians. Notice the order of events in verse 8. It is important. This is God's method of grace. First, the gospel was preached. Second, many who heard believed. Third, those who believed were baptized. According to the pattern and the precept of the New Testament, baptism is for believers only (Acts 7:37). No infants were ever baptized because their parents were believers, only believers themselves. Believers follow Christ in baptism because he commands it (Mark 16:15–16). By baptism we identify ourselves with Christ and his people, confess our faith in him, and renounce our former religion as darkness and idolatry (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:4–6).

5. GOD HAS A GREAT MULTITUDE OF CHOSEN SINNERS IN THIS WORLD WHOM HE WILL SAVE BY THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL (verses 9–10). The fear of man must never stop the mouths of God's servants (Jeremiah 1:8–10). The Lord appeared to Paul in a vision and encouraged him to faithfully continue preaching the gospel at Corinth, assuring him of three things: THE PRESENCE OF GOD—"I am with you;" THE PROTECTION OF GOD—"No man shall set on you to hurt you;" and THE PURPOSE OF GOD—"I have much people in this city." The inspiration God gave Paul for evangelism at Corinth was the certain salvation of his elect. All who were chosen in eternity and redeemed at Calvary must be called at God's appointed time; and he will call them through the voice of a gospel preacher (Romans 10:17; 1 Peter 1:23–25).

6. GOD'S SERVANTS SEEK AND FOLLOW HIS DIRECTION (v. 11). Having his orders from God, Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and six months. He remained there seeking the Lord's sheep (John 10:16) and establishing the church in the doctrine of Christ (Ephesians 4:11–16). Though he was a resident preacher at Corinth, the Apostle continued to serve the church of God at large. Both I and II Thessalonians were written while Paul was at Corinth. Let all who worship God pray for, support, and be obedient to their faithful, God ordained pastors (Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13 and Hebrews 13:7, 17).

54. APOLLOS—THE ALEXANDRIAN ORATOR

Acts 18:12–28

In the passage before us we have a hurried account of the last part of Paul's second missionary journey and the beginning of his third. We follow the Apostle from Corinth to Ephesus, from Ephesus to Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem back to Antioch. After spending some time in Antioch, he visited the churches of Galatia and Phrygia. Then he went back to Ephesus, where chapter 19 begins. That is a lot of territory to cover in nineteen verses! We want to say, "Wait, Luke. Tell us more. What happened at Cenchrea? How did Phoebe, that lady in the Cenchrean church, win the praise Paul bestowed upon her in Romans 16:1–2? What happened while Paul was at Jerusalem, Antioch, Galatia, and Phrygia?" There must have been many interesting events in those places. But Luke chose to omit all the details. He appears to have been anxious to introduce us to the next scene in the history of the early church and to a man who impressed him greatly, Apollos, the Alexandrian orator. Luke was moved by the Holy Spirit to introduce this man to us with deeper respect and admiration than he used to present any other man in the Book of Acts (verses 24–25). Apollos is set before us as an example of Christian character, whose faith and faithfulness should be followed (Hebrews 13:7, 17). However, before Apollos is introduced, Luke was directed to give some account of Paul's journey from Corinth to Antioch for our instruction.

THE TYPICAL PERSECUTION (verses 12–17)—Wherever Paul went preaching the gospel he met with persecution. God restrained the malice of his enemies at Corinth for a while; but in time he allowed the venom of the old serpent, Satan, to spue out against his servant, "and the Jews made insurrection with one accord against Paul" (verses 12–13). Our King James Version reads "This fellow", but the Jews did not say that. The word "fellow" was added by the translators. The Jews said with disgust, "This …!" They had no word evil enough to describe their opinion of God's messenger.

Verses 14–15—Gallio should not have allowed the Gentiles to beat Sosthenes. As a civil magistrate it was his responsibility to protect all. However, he is to be commended in the fact that he refused to hear the charges brought against Paul. It is not the business of civil courts to make rules or judgments in matters regarding the free exercise of religion.

Verses 16–17—Crispus, who was the ruler of the synagogue, had been converted by the grace of God (v. 8). Sosthenes was elected to take his place. Sosthenes, who had come to Gallio to have Paul beaten, was himself beaten with the stripes he had hoped to inflict upon Paul. Many a Haman has been hanged on the gallows he built for the hanging of God's faithful Mordicais.

By these events at Corinth the Holy Spirit teaches two lessons emphatically. First, THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST IS OFFENSIVE TO LOST MEN. The plain declaration of redemption by Christ and salvation by grace alone through faith in him is to them that perish foolishness, a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence. Natural man is tolerant of and even likes natural religion. Any religion that bases salvation upon man's freewill, good works, or religious ceremonies is acceptable to him. But he will not tolerate the gospel of God's free and sovereign grace in Christ (Galatians 5:11). All who faithfully confess Christ to men will have to endure the wrath of men (Matthew 10:16–39). All who preach the gospel in purity, without compromise will pay a price for doing so (Galatians 1:10–12). The second lesson is equally obvious: GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL RULE OF THIS WORLD WORKS ALL THINGS TOGETHER FOR THE GOOD OF HIS ELECT (Romans 8:28). The Jews' persecution was as much the work of God's providence for Paul as the benevolence of Aquila and Priscilla. It became evident to Paul that his work at Corinth was done. He did not flee for fear of the Jews; but he saw their persecution as an indication that God would have him move on to another place. When God thwarted the Jews' plans, he confirmed his promise to Paul (v. 10). This beating of Sosthenes was one of the things God used to bring him to Christ (1 Corinthians 1:1).

THE TRAVELING PREACHER (verses 18–23)—It is highly improbable that Paul took a Jewish vow and shaved his head (v. 18). The one Luke refers to as having taken a vow was Aquila. Paul, above all men, cast aside all Jewish laws, ceremonies, and rituals (Colossians 2:16–23). He might for expediency have Timothy circumcised, but he would never have taken a vow and shaved his head in pledge of it. Not Paul!

Verse 19—When he came to Ephesus, where he had left Aquila and Priscilla, Paul went again into the synagogue to reason with the Jews. So great was his compassion for his kinsmen that he could not let them perish without preaching Christ to them (Romans 10:1–2).

Verse 20–21—The Apostle was determined to go up to Jerusalem, not to keep the Jewish feast, but to be there during the Passover because there he would have opportunity to preach the gospel to many. Recognizing and submitting to God's providence, he made all his plans and commitments with one condition—"If God will" (James 4:13–15).

Verses 22–23—Young believers, like young plants, need much care. Paul tenderly cared for and ministered to the needs of these young churches and young saints. He traveled alone for hundreds of miles, at his own expense, to preach the gospel to the unbelieving Jews and Gentiles and for the comfort and edification of God's saints (Ephesians 4:11–16).

THE TALENTED PULPITEER (verses 24–28)—While Paul was away Apollos came to Ephesus, preaching the gospel of Christ (v. 24). Born in Alexandria in Egypt, he was a man of exceptional gifts. He was "an eloquent man," rational, prudent, well-educated, and influential in speech. He was "mighty in the scriptures". That is to say, he was greatly gifted of God in understanding and explaining the Old Testament Scripture in the light of Christ's Person and work.

Verse 25—Apollos was taught in the way of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). He zealously promoted the glory of God and sought the salvation of his people (Romans 12:11). Yet, he knew only the message and doctrine of John the Baptist: repentance toward God and the remission of sins by Christ, the Lamb of God (Matthew 3:1–2; John 1:29). He knew nothing of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the mighty works of God through the Apostles. His doctrine was true, gospel doctrine, but Apollos had not been instructed in those things which had been revealed since the time of John the Baptist.

Verse 26—Aquila and Priscilla invited Apollos to their house and privately instructed him more fully in the gospel. Priscilla assisted her husband in the teaching of Apollos privately in her own house, not publicly in the church. As a godly woman, she behaved with meekness (1 Peter 3:1–2). It is contrary to both Scripture and modesty for a woman to publicly reprove or instruct a man (1 Timothy 2:11–12; 1 Corinthians 14:34).

Verse 27—The believers at Ephesus sent a letter to the church at Corinth, recommending Apollos to them as an able gospel preacher. When he arrived there, he was an instrument in the hands of God for much spiritual good to the brethren who "had believed through grace." Faith in Christ is not the work of man's freewill, but of God's free grace (Ephesians 2:8; Colossians 2:12; Philippians 1:29).

Verse 28—Being taught of God, Apollos was a mighty and convincing teacher. In the face of much opposition, he proved by the Old Testament scriptures "that Jesus is the Christ," the sent One of God, the Savior of the world (1 John 4:1–4).

55. "COME OUT FROM AMONG THEM"

Acts 19:1–12

In this chapter we follow Paul back to Ephesus where he had left Aquila and Priscilla (

Acts 18:19–21). While he was away Apollos had come and spent some time there preaching "the baptism of John" in the synagogue. Aquila and Priscilla befriended him and instructed him more fully in the gospel of the grace of God. Apollos then went to Corinth to preach to the church Paul had established there. When the Apostle Paul came back to Ephesus he found "certain disciples" there who, like Apollos, were disciples of John the Baptist. These disciples of the Baptist had come in among and identified themselves with the brethren who were still worshiping with the Jews in the synagogue. Acts 19 opens with Paul meeting these brethren.

A TIME OF TRANSITION—If we are to interpret any portion of the Book of Acts properly, it must be remembered that the history of the church recorded in Acts was a period of transitional development, much like that which we find in the four gospels. During those early years Christianity was still looked upon as a sect of Judaism. Believers continued to worship with the Jews in their synagogues. Those at Jerusalem continued for sometime to worship in the Jewish temple. Many genuine believers remained ignorant of many important gospel truths, some for years, until God sent them a gospel preacher to instruct them in the faith of Christ. We have already seen two examples of this fact. CORNELIUS (Acts 10:1–2) was a true believer. That cannot be disputed. The Word of God describes him as a just and devout man who feared and worshiped God (Acts 10:2, 4, 22). But he worshiped God only in the light of the Old Testament scriptures until Peter came and told him that the Savior for whom he looked had already come, redeemed his people, and ascended back into Heaven. What he believed before was true. He trusted the Son of God as he was revealed in the types, promises, and prophesies of the Old Testament, walking in the light God had given him. APOLLOS had more light than Cornelius (Acts 18:24–28); but he too was greatly lacking. He was not misinformed, but uninformed. He knew only the teachings of John the Baptist until Aquila and Priscilla explained the doctrine of Christ to him more fully.

Neither Cornelius nor Apollos were heretics. They did not embrace a false gospel. They believed the truth as fully as they knew it. They trusted Christ according to the light they had. When God gave them more light they gladly received it, submitted to it, and obeyed it. In the opening verses of Acts 19 Paul met another group of twelve men like Apollos. They were true believers who knew only the baptism of John.

"HAVE YOU RECEIVED THE HOLY SPIRIT?" (verses 1–3). These men were disciples of Christ. They followed the teachings of his servant, John the Baptist. They trusted the Lord Jesus, professed faith in his name, and were baptized in his name, either by John or his disciples. After some discussion with them, Paul asked, "Have you received the Holy Spirit" (our translation reads) "since you believed?" That is a very poor translation. The question is more accurately translated, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" (N.A.S.V, N.I.V., The Amplified Bible). Their response, "We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Spirit," really amounts to, "Do you mean the Holy Spirit has come?" Certainly, being John's disciples, they knew that the Holy Spirit existed and knew the promise of his descent (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16). John's disciples were well instructed in the Old Testament prophecies relating to the coming of Christ, the outpouring of and baptism in the Spirit by him, and the extraordinary signs that would accompany it (Ezekiel 36:21–28; Joel 2:28–32; Zechariah 12:10; John 7:39). But these men were totally ignorant of the fact that the Holy Spirit had been given. They knew he had been promised, but did not know that he had come. It is a mistake to make more out of the text than this, a mistake that leads to serious error.

"Unto what then were you baptized?" Paul assumed that since they claimed to be believers they had been baptized (Mark 16:16; Romans 6:3–6). His question to these men was, "If you were not baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in what name were you baptized?" They answered, "Unto John's baptism." Believing the message of John concerning the coming of Christ, they were baptized. Two things need to be clearly understood. (1). All who truly believe on the Lord Jesus Christ have received the Holy Spirit. This is the glaring difference between the true believer and the carnal professor (John 3:3–8; Romans 8:9–14; Galatians 5:22–23). (2). It is the responsibility of every believer to follow the command and example of Christ in believer's baptism (Romans 6:3–6). By baptism, being immersed in the watery grave and rising up out of it, we publicly confess our faith in Christ and identify ourselves with him.

JOHN'S BAPTISM (verses 4–5)—Many teach that John's baptism was not Christian baptism. Dividing verses 4 and 5, they insist that Paul rebaptized these disciples. But the text teaches exactly the opposite. Read the two verses together. Put them in quotation marks. Both verses are to be understood as Paul's explanation of John's baptism. He is stating that John's baptism is exactly the same as we practice today, the immersion of professed believers in the name of the Lord Jesus. NOTE: In support of this interpretation, it should be observed that there is no indication anywhere in the New Testament that any of John's disciples were rebaptized by our Lord or his apostles, though the opportunity clearly presented itself (John 3:22–36); and there is no indication that Apollos was rebaptized after being instructed in the way of God more perfectly (Acts 18:26). Moreover, if verse 5 contained Luke's words describing what Paul had done, it seems most reasonable that he would have specified that Paul baptized them, as he specified that Paul laid hands upon them in verse 6. In verse 4 and 5 Luke tells us what Paul said. In verse 6 he tells what Paul did.

THE COMMUNICATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (verses 6–7)—Just as Peter and John laid their hands on the believing Samaritans who had been baptized by Philip (Acts 8:14–17), Paul laid his hands upon these twelve men who had been baptized by John the Baptist and they received the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit. Once more Paul was evidently confirmed as an apostle of Christ (Hebrews 2:3–4). In the apostolic era many received those gifts, but only an apostle could communicate them to others. Remember, Philip who possessed the gifts could not communicate them to the Samaritans, but had to wait for the Apostles to do so. Therefore, these extraordinary, outward signs necessarily ceased when the apostles were gone, not because God has changed, but because they are no longer needed. We now have the perfect, complete Revelation of God in Holy Scripture (1 Corinthians 13:10; 2 Peter 1:16–21).

THE SEPARATION OF THE BELIEVERS (verses 8–12). As stated before, the saints of God at this time met with the Jews in their synagogues. They earnestly sought the salvation of the Jewish people. But there comes a time when those who follow Christ must separate themselves from those who despise him. Light and darkness cannot abide together. So after three months of faithful instruction, Paul led the saints of God to separate themselves from those who hated the gospel of Christ (2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1; Rev. 18:4). Paul and his little band were despised by everyone in town. Meeting in a little borrowed room, they were mocked, ridiculed, and scorned by the rich, prosperous, and powerful religionists of Corinth. But God was with them. He confirmed his gospel, his messenger, and his people, clearly demonstrating his pleasure in them. He always does! (See 1 Samuel 2:30).

56. "SO MIGHTILY GREW THE WORD OF GOD AND PREVAILED"

Acts 19:13–20

Sometimes it appears that the cause of Christ is failing, that Satan and the powers of darkness are triumphant; but that is never the case (Matthew 16:18; Isaiah 55:11; 1 Corinthians 15:58). In the end all things shall show forth the praise of our God and Savior, all of God's elect will be saved, every purpose of God shall be accomplished, and the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our God. Things are not as they seem. Our great Savior is sovereignly ruling this world from his heavenly throne, accomplishing his will everywhere by his omnipotent power and grace. The instrument by which Christ prevails over the hearts of men is the gospel of his free and sovereign grace. The church of God is a conquering army; and the weapon, the only weapon, of her warfare is the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, the gospel of Christ.

Nowhere is this fact so vividly displayed as in the Book of Acts. In Acts 19, when Paul came to the city of Ephesus he found twelve men who believed God. They began meeting together in a little room in a school house to worship God and preach the gospel. From the beginning they met with opposition. The Jewish zealots, the idolatrous worshipers of Diana, the businessmen, and even the Jewish gypsies who passed through town were all united in their opposition to the band of God's saints who met at the school of Tyrannus. Satan did everything he could to stop the spread of the gospel in Ephesus. But Paul and his little band went right on preaching Jesus Christ and him crucified. They had no regard for the religions of the people, the opinions of the people, or the power of the people. Their only concern was for the glory of God and the truth of God. God always honors people like that (1 Samuel 2:30). In less than three years' time that little band of believers had become a large, influential congregation, well grounded in the doctrine of Christ. By the end of three years of faithful preaching the church at Ephesus was so large that it required several elders to oversee its ministry (Acts 20:17).

This phenomenal growth came about without the use of puppet shows, musical recitals, Sunday school contests, ball teams, or the testimonials of famous movie stars, athletes, and politicians. Without gimmickery and without political influence, the naked truth of God, preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, in the simplicity of everyday language, had done its work. "So mightily grew the Word of God and prevailed" (v. 20). Four things in verses 13–20 are set before us by God the Holy Spirit for our learning and admonition.

AN EXAMPLE OF MEN WHO MAKE MERCHANDISE OF THE GOSPEL (verses 13–16). The sons of Sceva were vagabond Jews, gypsies who traveled from city to city practicing witchcraft in the name of God! They claimed to tell men's fortunes by astrological signs, cast evil or good spells on people, conjure up the spirits of the dead, and cast out demons. To give some credibility to their work they claimed that their magic was passed on from one generation to another since the days of Solomon. These demonic people were active in our Lord's day (Matthew 12:27). They were active in Paul's day. And they are active today. Beware of the occult. Do not toy with witchcraft, astrology, etc. God commands us to have nothing to do with such people (Leviticus 19:31; 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:10–11).

These men did whatever they had to do to make a buck and to gain influence. When they saw the power Paul possessed by the name of Christ (verses 11–12), they decided to imitate his power and tried to cast out demons by the name of "Jesus whom Paul preaches" (v. 13). They had no regard for the honor of Christ, his Word, or the souls of men. But if it could get them gain, they were willing to prostitute anything, even the things of God. We have many like these sons of Sceva today in pulpits, on radio, and on television throughout this country. Like the willfully ignorant multitudes in Ephesus, multitudes today follow them, send them money, and keep them in business. Those charlatans are money grubbing, self-serving false prophets who willingly prostitute the gospel of Christ and the glory of God for their own interests (Jeremiah 5:30–31; 6:13–14; Isaiah 56:10–11). Like self-serving politicians, the preachers of this age keep their ears to the ground and say exactly what people want to hear (2 Timothy 4:3–4; 2 Corinthians 11:14–15). They will do or say whatever they have to to get a name for themselves, a crowd to follow them, and money in their coffers. Have nothing to do with the religious hullabaloo of this age. God is not in it (2 John 10–11). As the sons of Sceva were exposed, even by the demons of Hell, God will expose the modern sons of Sceva, if not in this world, in the world to come (Matthew 7:21–23).

AN EXAMPLE OF GOD'S OVERRULING PROVIDENCE (v. 17). When these sons of Sceva went running out of the house, beaten and naked, everyone in Ephesus heard about it. The demon in that man, being forced by the Son of God to do so, confessed his subjection to Christ and to his servant Paul by the power of Christ's name (v. 15). Thus, the evil the sons of Sceva thought to do was overruled by our sovereign Lord for the glory of his own great name. We worship a God who is absolutely sovereign (Psalm 76:10). No creature in Heaven, earth, or Hell can wiggle a finger without his decree, permission, and direction. "The Most High rules!" (Daniel 4:32; Psalm 115:3; 135:6; Isaiah 46:9–11; Lamentations 3:37). Even the evil that men do, he turns to good!

AN EXAMPLE OF TRUE REPENTANCE (verses 18–20). As a result of what happened to the sons of Sceva the curiosity of many was aroused, and they came to hear Paul preach the gospel of Christ. When they heard the gospel, God saved many and gave them faith in Christ (Romans 10:17). Here are three marks of true repentance which were displayed in these people.

1. THEY BELIEVED ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST (v. 18). They trusted his righteousness, his redemption, and his rule. They trusted Christ alone for all their salvation (1 Corinthians 1:30).

2. THEY PUBLICLY CONFESSED THEIR FAITH IN CHRIST (v. 18). This was not a confession of sin in Paul's ear, as though he were a popish priest, but a public confession of faith in Christ by believer's baptism (Matthew 3:6; Romans 6:3–6).

3. THEY PUBLICLY DENOUNCED THEIR FORMER RELIGION OF WORKS, SUPERSTITION, AND WILL WORSHIP (v. 19). Being saved by God's free grace in Christ, they publicly denounced the religion that had held them in bondage for so long. They did so by making a bonfire to burn their books of false religion and witchcraft. Why did they go to such extreme measures? To show their indignation and contempt for their former religion. To show their determination never to return to it. To put as great a distance as they could between themselves and those who continued in the ways of darkness. To prevent others from being led astray. And to show their complete allegiance to Christ and his gospel.

AN EXAMPLE OF CHRIST'S CONQUEST BY THE GOSPEL (v. 20). I cannot help thinking that above all else, this incident at Ephesus is recorded here by inspiration to encourage God's church and his servants to go on preaching the gospel. Luke is saying, "Carry the gospel of Christ into the field of battle and make war against the gates of Hell. As you preach the grace of God the Son of God rides forth on his white stallion, conquering and to conquer. Thus, the mighty Word of God shall prevail!"

57. THE UPROAR AT EPHESUS—A LESSON IN DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Acts 19:31–41

The uproar of the multitudes against the saints of God at Ephesus was no accident. It was not the result of men being beyond God's control. Rather, it was one event among many by which the Lord our God sovereignly accomplished and is accomplishing his purpose of grace. The uproar came to pass because wicked men, with wicked hearts, for wicked purposes set themselves in opposition to the preaching of the gospel of God's free and sovereign grace in Christ. But God overruled their wickedness for the accomplishment of his good designs. Here are four basic, foundation truths of Holy Scripture by which believing hearts are sustained with peace in the midst of earthly troubles.

1. THE LORD OUR GOD IS TOTALLY SOVEREIGN. He has the right and the power to do what he will with all things; and he always exercises his right of sovereignty (Job 42:2; Isaiah 14:24, 27: 46:9–11; 55:11; Psalm 115:3; 135:6; Jeremiah 32:17; Daniel 4:35–37; Matthew 20:15; Romans 9:11–23; Ephesians 1:11, 22). In creation, in providence, and in grace, the Lord our God always has his way.

2. OUR GREAT, SOVEREIGN GOD HAS A PLAN, A PURPOSE OF GRACE AND PREDESTINATION, BY WHICH HE CONSTANTLY RULES ALL THINGS. His plan is eternal (2 Timothy 1:9; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Matthew 25:34). It is unalterable (Numbers 23:19; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17). And God's eternal purpose is all inclusive. Nothing happens in time except that which God purposed in eternity (Genesis 50:20; Isaiah 45:7, Proverbs 16:1–4, 9, 33; 21:1; Amos 3:6).

3. GOD ALMIGHTY SOVEREIGNLY RULES ALL THINGS IN HEAVEN, EARTH, AND HELL TO ACCOMPLISH HIS ETERNAL PLAN AND PURPOSE OF PREDESTINATION (Romans 8:28–30; 11:36; Ephesians 1:11). God is not a mere spectator standing on the sidelines, rooting and cheering for the accomplishment of his goals. He is everywhere, sustaining all things, ruling all things, and bringing all things to their predestined end. The tiny sparrow appears to us as an insignificant thing. Its flight looks giddy, and haphazard. But the sparrow does not light upon any branch or fall to the ground without God's direction. "God's all wise providence has before appointed what bough the sparrow shall perch upon, what grains it shall pick up, where it shall lodge and where it shall build, on what it shall live, and where it shall die" (Augustus Toplady). God's providence rules everywhere and everything absolutely: the physical world (Isaiah 40:12; Nah. 1:3), the animal world (Daniel 6:22; Matthew 10:29), the nations of the world (Psalm 33:9–11; Isaiah 40:15; Daniel 2:21; 4:17), all the people of the world (Proverbs 16:9; 21:1; Acts 18:9; Exodus 12:36; 2 Samuel 16:10–11; Psalm 76:10; Exodus 14:17; Acts 4:27–28), and even Satan and the demons of Hell (Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6). Everything in the Universe is under the rule of God, EVERYTHING!

4. GOD RULES EVERYTHING IN PROVIDENCE TO ACCOMPLISH THE SALVATION OF HIS ELECT AND THE GLORY OF HIS OWN GREAT NAME (Romans 8:28; 11:36). Nothing in creation is left to chance, luck, fate, or the will of man. Everything is directed by God so that in the end all his people shall be with Christ and like Christ (Romans 8:29–30), and everything that has been shall praise him (Rev. 5:13). It was no accident that brought Rebecca to the well to meet Abraham's servant. It was not a streak of luck that brought Joseph to Egypt "to save much people alive." It was not by chance that Pharaoh's daughter found Moses in the ark and preserved him alive. It was not blind fate that directed the millstone which crushed Abimelech's head. Every event in history is directed by the hand of God. He even gives the lightening charge to strike its mark (Job 28:26; 37:3; 38:25, 35). Study the events recorded in Acts 19:21–41 seeking to see how that the hand of God sovereignly ruled, even in the uproar at Ephesus; and understand that the unseen hand of Divine providence rules all things today for the good of God's elect and the glory of his name. Here God the Holy Spirit teaches us four things.

First, ALL WHO ARE BORN OF GOD ARE LED BY THE SPIRIT OF GOD (verses 21–22). As it was the Spirit of God who led Simeon to the temple to see Christ (Luke 2:27), so it was the Spirit of God who led Paul from place to place preaching the gospel of Christ (Acts 20:22), so it is to this day. The steps of God's people are ordered by the Holy Spirit (Psalm 37:23; Romans 8:14). NOTE: Timothy and Erastus ministered to Paul and ministered to God's saints under Paul's direction (v. 22). They subjected themselves to the Lord's Apostle, being themselves filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 4:18, 21; Hebrews 13:7, 17). Those who are led of the Spirit submit themselves to those whom God has placed in authority over them.

Second, THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST ALWAYS STIRS UP THE WRATH OF MEN (verses 23–28). Men are never indifferent to the message or the messengers of God's free grace. Anytime the gospel of Christ is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, those who hear it will either bow to the claims of Christ or rise up in opposition against his ambassador (

Matthew 10:22, 34). "There arose no small stir about THAT WAY." The gospel of Christ is distinct from the religions of men. The way of grace, the way of Christ, is not one way among many, but the way, "that way" that is altogether different from the ways of men. All the religions of men make the way to God and salvation dependent in some way upon man. But the ways of freewill, works religion is the way of death (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25). The gospel of Christ makes the way to God and salvation to be Christ alone (John 10:9; 14:6). Notice two things:

1. The business of religion has always been, as it is today, a popular, profitable business (verses 24–25). These men made and sold religious trinkets, icons, images, etc. just as many today sell crosses, images, religious pictures, etc.

2. The gods which men make and cherish are puny, helpless things, worthy of contempt rather than praise (verses 26–28; Isaiah 46:5–7; 1 Kings 18:27–29).

Third, TRIALS AND PERSECUTIONS ARE FOR THE GOOD OF GOD'S PEOPLE (verses 29–34). Yes, even the wrath of wicked men is used by God for the good of his elect (Psalm 76:10). By means of this uproar and persecution, God's church was refined. The chaff was separated from the wheat. In the midst of the trial, Gaius and Aristarchus stood firm. Alexander the Coppersmith withered before the fire (1 Timothy 1:19–20; 2 Timothy 4:15–16). Yet, God stopped his mouth (verses 33–34).

Fourth, THE LORD KNOWS HOW TO DELIVER HIS PEOPLE OUT OF THEIR TROUBLES (vv 35–41; Psalm 18:1–7, 43–50). The Lord God used the priests of the temple of Diana (v. 31) and a frightened town clerk to preserve his people from a raging mob. "Thus God, one way or other, sometimes by friends, and sometimes by foes, kept his church and people from being ruined; and his hand is not shortened now" (Matthew Poole). If God will give us grace to understand that all things are under his absolute control and to trust his wisdom, love, and grace toward us in Christ, we will worship and trust him at all times and give thanks to him at all times, in all things, and for all things (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18).

58. HURRYING TO JERUSALEM WITH THE GOSPEL

Acts 20:1–16

In the previous chapter we read about the uproar at Ephesus. The angry mob stood for more than two hours crying, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians." Finally, "the town clerk appeased the people" and "dismissed the assembly." We pick up the story in the opening verses of chapter twenty.

DETERMINED TO GO TO JERUSALEM (verses 1–16)—Here we have another of Luke's rapid descriptions of Paul's ministry. He is leading up to the Apostle's farewell message to the Ephesian elders at Miletus. But in these verses Luke very quickly tells us that after the uproar at Ephesus, Paul went right on doing what God had called him to do. He spent the next several months traveling, by land and by sea, through Asia, Macedonia, and Greece, visiting the churches which had been established during his earlier ministry. Everywhere he went he did the same thing. In the synagogues, in the streets, in the churches, and in the market places, Paul preached Christ to the people. But all the while he was hurrying to Jerusalem (v. 16).

Why did Paul have this preoccupation with Jerusalem? God distinctly appointed him to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Yet, in reading through the Book of Acts, we see him repeatedly determined to return to Jerusalem on the feast days. Was this, as some have suggested, because he had a hard time breaking with the past and shaking off the grave clothes of dead Judaism? Not hardly! The apostle Paul was forthright and constant in his declaration of the believer's freedom from legal, ceremonial, carnal ordinances (Romans 6:14, 15; 7:1; 10:4; Galatians 5:2, 4; Colossians 2:8–23). Paul was determined, if at all possible, to be in Jerusalem on the feast days, not to observe those feasts, but because he knew that on those days he would be able to preach the gospel to more of his kinsman than at any other time. And he was determined to do everything in his power to see them saved by the grace of God (Romans 9:1–3; 10:1–4).

THE MESSAGE OF THE BIBLE—Wherever he went, the message Paul preached was Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). Sometimes he preached to Jews, sometimes to Gentiles. Sometimes he preached to large crowds of lost people, sometimes to small bands of believers. Sometimes he preached to learned philosophers, sometimes to simple women. But his message was always the same. He preached Christ, the whole of Christ, and only Christ to all people. Sometimes he was a little long winded, preaching until midnight. Sometimes people got tired while he was preaching and fell asleep (v. 9). Often he was persecuted for his message. But Paul never changed his message. His message was Jesus Christ and him crucified.

THE BIBLE, THE WORD OF GOD, IS IN ITS ENTIRETY A BOOK ABOUT THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. It is not a book about science, history, politics, morality, or even religious dogma. It is a book about Christ (Luke 24:27, 44–47). Christ is the living Word of whom the written Word speaks. It is the business and responsibility of every gospel preacher to preach and teach nothing else but Jesus Christ and him crucified. To do so is to faithfully preach and teach "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27; 1 Corinthians 2:2). All the prophecies of the Old Testament are predictions of Christ. All the sacrifices and ceremonies of the law were pictures of Christ. All the temporal deliverances of individual believers and the nation of Israel were illustrations of the redemption of God's elect by Christ. The law was given by Moses to show man his need of Christ. The four Gospels record the history of Christ and his teachings. And the Epistles explain the meaning of our Lord's teachings. Be sure you understand this. Every book of the Bible, every chapter, every verse, every line, every word in Holy Scripture is designed by God the Holy Spirit to reveal Christ to his people. Stop studying the Bible to find out facts and buttress doctrine. Study the Word of God with the desire to know him of whom the Scriptures speak (John 5:39). If you find any text in the Book of God that does not immediately cause your heart to look to Christ, you do not yet understand that text. The doctrine of the Bible is Christ. The law of the Bible is Christ. The gospel of the Bible is Christ. Do you see that? Any doctrine divorced from Christ is heresy, a mere show of intellectualism. Any precept divorced from Christ is self-righteousness. Paul went everywhere preaching Christ. And any sermon that does not point men to Christ ought never to have been preached. Any doctrine that does not have Christ for its essence must not be believed. Any precept that is not motivated by love for and faith in Christ must not be obeyed. From Genesis 1:1 through Revelation 22:21, "Christ is all, and in all!"

A PLOT DISCOVERED (verses 1–6)—Wherever Paul went preaching the gospel of Christ he met with opposition. Proud flesh cannot tolerate the message of salvation by grace alone through the merits of Christ alone. Paul again discovered a plot against his life. While in Greece the enemies of the cross "laid wait for him" (verses 2–3). "Over the centuries of the Christian church the lives of God's servants often have been in danger. Many have been martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ. Others have suffered intensely. God has never promised a bed of roses. Remember what Paul himself wrote to the Philippians: ‘For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake' (1:29) … As a matter of fact, the church has always been at its purest when it has had to face suffering and martyrdom for Jesus Christ" (Donald Grey Barnhouse).

Paul left Greece after three months. As he prepared to sail to Syria, he learned about the plot against him. So he took Sopater and Luke, his traveling companions, and went by land through Macedonia to Philippi, and sailed from Philippi to Troas. There they met up with their other co-workers, and stayed for seven days.

A COMMUNION SERVICE ON THE LORD'S DAY (verses 7–12)—Notice that the disciples came together for worship on "the first day of the week" rather than the seventh. Like many things in this transitional period, Sabbath observance was terminated gradually. The new day of worship, the Lord's day (Rev. 1:10), was established by the resurrection of our Lord (Matthew 28:1). Sunday is not the "Christian Sabbath". We are expressly forbidden to observe a legalistic Sabbath day (Colossians 2:16) in this day of grace. Christ is our Sabbath. We cease from our own works and rest in him by faith (Hebrews 4:9–10). Yet, it is clear that the established day of worship in the New Testament was Sunday (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). On this day the church gathered to observe the Lord's Supper and listen to the preaching of the gospel. The communion service was a very simple part of public worship, not an elaborate ceremony. When the saints of God met for worship on the Lord's day, they passed around a loaf of unleavened bread and a cup of wine and every believer took a portion for himself.

There was no restricted or closed communion in the New Testament! In this passage disciples from many different places observed the Lord's Table together because in Christ all true believers are truly one. They did not examine one another to see who was worthy to participate in the ordinance, but each believer examined himself before the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:28).

Paul was evidently a long winded preacher. He preached until midnight. Eutychus dozed off and fell out of a third floor window. Everyone presumed he was dead. Perhaps he was and Paul raised him from the dead. However, verse ten seems to imply that he was not killed by the fall. Either way, God intervened. After that, Paul continued preaching until daybreak!

Then (verses 13–16), after just a short stay at Troas, Paul and his friends departed for Assos, because Paul was determined to stop by Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem.

59. PAUL'S FAREWELL MESSAGE TO THE EPHESIAN ELDERS

Acts 20:17–38

Sometimes God places a man in a field of service for life to preach the gospel and rule the church of God in a given place permanently. The man who is truly the servant of God will be faithful in the place of his calling. He cannot be driven away by hardships, trials, or opposition; and he cannot be drawn away by the allurements of personal gain, worldly comfort, or greater recognition. Preachers who use churches as stepping stones on the road to ministerial success are not God's servants. They are hirelings who sell their services to the highest bidder.

However, the Lord sometimes sends a man to a place to do a specific work. When his work has been accomplished, the Lord sends him to another place to accomplish other things. Faithful men move from place to place to preach the gospel as they are led by the Spirit of God. Their place of service is not determined by anything except their desire to serve the interests of Christ's kingdom according to the will of God. Every God sent preacher is a spokesman for God, and is to be received and honored as such (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; Hebrews 13:7, 17). However, he is only a temporary spokesman, a voice crying in the wilderness (John 1:23). No matter how useful, influential, and beneficial a man's ministry is in a given place, it is only temporary. It will, either by death or by the direction of God the Holy Spirit, come to an end. Yet, the cause of Christ, the church of God, and the gospel of God's free grace in Christ continues. Thus it becomes the duty of God's servants to prepare the people they serve for a continued, uninterrupted, vibrant ministry when they are removed.

That is what Paul is doing in Acts 20:17–38. He had faithfully preached the gospel of Christ at Ephesus for three years. The Lord had greatly blessed his labors to the conversion of many. But the time had come for him to move elsewhere. His work at Ephesus was done. The Spirit of God led him to Jerusalem. Paul was leaving behind a large congregation, one that required the labors of several preachers (elders) to oversee it. Probably, the church at Ephesus met in several congregations throughout the city, with each one having its own pastor/teacher. The Apostle Paul called for all the elders at Ephesus to meet him at Miletus, where he gave them the solemn farewell message contained in these verses.

PAUL WAS AN EXEMPLARY GOSPEL PREACHER (verses 17–27). Here he sets himself before the elders at Ephesus as an example of what every gospel preacher ought to be, both in life and in doctrine. He did not speak with arrogance, but with honest confidence (2 Timothy 4:6–8). He had conscientiously done what God sent him to do. He had been an example to these men of what he expected from them, and they all knew it. They knew him to be a gracious, sober minded faithful man. He was not a self-seeking, self-promoting, self-serving religious charlatan (1 Corinthians 4:1–5). Both the tenor of his life and the doctrine of his lips demonstrated his devotion to the gospel and the glory of Christ (Philippians 4:9).

In his daily life, as in the pulpit, Paul was the servant of the Lord Jesus Christ (verses 18–19). He made no pretense of perfection, but he did live blamelessly before men, as one whose manner of life was above reproach. That simply means that in the tenor of his life Paul was evidently a man consecrated to Christ. That is what God requires of every gospel preacher (1 Timothy 3:2–7). Paul served the Lord with humility, knowing his own insufficiency in the flesh (2 Corinthians 2:16), and the sufficiency of God's grace (2 Corinthians 3:5; 12:9). He served the people of God with sincerity and great concern. He was faithful to God and to men in the midst of many trials and temptations (2 Corinthians 4:7–14). He was consistent in his devotion to Christ, not spasmodic. For three years the men to whom he was speaking had watched him day and night. They found him to be steadfast, never wavering. In the pulpit and out, he was the servant of God. He was not pretentious and hypocritical. He was a preacher whose doctrine was demonstrated in a life of devotion.

Paul's preaching, like his life, exemplified what the servant of God must be and do (verses 20–27). He came to Ephesus to preach the gospel of Christ to the people of that city; and he had been faithful to his calling. His message was constant. In public and in private, he preached Jesus Christ crucified, teaching "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (verses 20–21). Paul never deviated from the message God sent him to preach (1 Corinthians 2:1–2; 9:16). His motive was pure (verses 22–25). Knowing by divine revelation the troubles that awaited him, Paul would not be deterred from the work to which he was called (Acts 21:4, 11). Read verse 24, and pray for the grace and commitment to the gospel that Paul demonstrated! His hands were clean (verses 26–27). As God's appointed watchman he had faithfully proclaimed the word of life and grace God gave him (Ezekiel 3:15–21; 33:1–16). No one perished because Paul kept back the Word of God! Two things must characterize every gospel preacher: (1) He must live by the gospel. The man who preaches the gospel must live by gospel principles as one who is dedicated to the glory of God. (2) He must preach the gospel. He must, with honesty, plainness, and boldness, preach the gospel to all who will hear him, never hedging, never trimming his message.

In verses 28–31, PAUL LAYS A GREAT BURDEN OF RESPONSIBILITY UPON ALL WHO ARE ORDAINED OF GOD TO PREACH THE GOSPEL. This charge is specifically addressed to pastors, but its implications extend to all who are in positions of leadership in local churches (elders, teachers, deacons, missionaries, and evangelists).

It is the responsibility of every pastor to be an overseer, a spiritual shepherd and ruler in the church of God (v. 28). The church belongs to Christ. He bought it with his precious, sin-atoning blood. It does not belong to the pastor or the people. It belongs to Christ, and must ever be regarded as his peculiar possession. Pastors are under-shepherds to Christ, placed in the church by the gifts and graces of God (Ephesians 4:8–16). God raises up chosen men, gives them the gifts necessary for the work he has for them to do, and places them where he wants them in his vineyard (Jeremiah 3:15). Yet, the work of the gospel ministry is a laborious responsibility that demands the preacher to be diligent in prayer, study, and preaching, and watchful over his own soul (1 Timothy 4:12–16; 2 Timothy 4:1–5). As Christ's under-shepherd, it is the pastor's responsibility to watch over, protect, feed, and rule the church of God. He must watch over men's souls, protect them from danger, feed them with knowledge and understanding by the gospel, and rule the house of God by the preaching of the gospel and personal example (Hebrews 13:7, 17; 1 Peter 5:1–3).

The pastor's work is necessary because the people of God in this world, like sheep in the wilderness, face many dangers (verses 29–31). Many wolves rise up within the walls of professed Christianity that would devour the flock (free-willism, legalism, ritualism, etc.). It is the pastor's responsibility, by sound instruction in gospel doctrine, to protect Christ's sheep from the wolves of false religion.

ONLY GOD HIMSELF CAN PRESERVE HIS CHURCH IN THE GOSPEL (verses 32–38). Paul knew that. Though he had faithfully labored among the Ephesians, preaching the gospel for three years to them, though he left the church in the hands of capable men, he knew that only God himself and the gospel of his grace could effectually preserve the church in the faith of Christ. So he commended the church to God and to the word of his grace. He told them to look to God and to the word of his grace (his gospel) for direction (v. 32). He taught them to measure all who claimed to be gospel preachers by his own example of faithfulness and generosity (verses 33–35). As he left Ephesus, he prayed with his brethren and for them (verses 36–38; Ephesians 1:15–23; 3:14–21).

60. FIVE CHRISTIAN GRACES

Acts 20:17–38

Grace makes people gracious. Grace experienced in the heart causes grace to flow from the heart. Our Lord teaches us plainly that all who know the love of God in reality love one another (1 John 3:10, 16–18; 4:8; 5:1); and that all who have experienced God's forgiveness are forgiving of others (Matthew 6:14–15). All who are born of God are new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). All true believers have been given a new nature by the Holy Spirit which is gracious (Galatians 5:22–23). Believers are not perfect. The child of God has a nature of flesh and sin, with which he has a continual warfare (Romans 7:14–25). However, in the tenor of his life, a believer is a person who walks not after the flesh but after the Spirit. Here are five graces, five God given spiritual qualities, which are characteristics of all true believers.

HUMILITY (v. 19)—Paul, writing by inspiration of God, says, he served the Lord "with all humility of mind." Without humility there is no salvation (Psalm 34:18; 51:17; Isaiah 66:2; Matthew 5:3–5; 18:34; Philippians 3:3). And no man can serve God or the cause of his glory in this world without this God given "humbleness of mind" (Colossians 3:12). Anything done for Christ must be done with humility (Matthew 6:3, 5, 16, 33). Most people seem to think that humility is demonstrated by a timid, weak, cowardly spirit; or that it is to be seen in an unwillingness to be bold, decisive, and uncompromising. Nothing could be further from the truth. Moses was none of those things, though he was the most meek, humble man on the face of the earth (Numbers 12:3). Humility is not an act. It is an attitude of the heart. Humility is brokenness of heart before God by reason of sin and in gratitude for his love, mercy, and grace to sinners in Christ. Here are six things revealed in the Word of God as characteristics of humility.

1. Humility is a realization of personal unworthiness by reason of one's own depravity and sin before God (Job 42:1–2; Psalm 51:4–5). It is not a show of words which sound humble, but are designed to gain praise. Rather, it is a heartfelt unworthiness before the holy Lord God (Luke 18:13; Isaiah 6:5).

2. Humility is a renunciation of all merit and personal righteousness in the sight of God (Philippians 3:9). No man's heart is humbled before God so long as he imagines that he has anything by which he may merit God's favor above another, or imagines that his righteousnesses are more than filthy rags in God's sight (Isaiah 64:6).

3. Humility is an inexpressible gratitude of heart to God for his abundant, amazing grace to sinners in Christ (Psalm 116:12, 16). It causes a person to live with a sense of delightful obligation and indebtedness to the Lord God (1 Corinthians 9:15).

4. Humility is a willing submission and devotion of one's heart to the Lord Jesus Christ that cries, "Lord, what will you have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). It is devotion to Christ as Lord, submission to this providential rule of all things, and a determination of heart to obey him and honor him regardless of cost.

5. Humility gladly ascribes the whole work of salvation to God's free and sovereign grace through Christ (1 Corinthians 15:10).

6. Humility is the mind of Christ in a person which causes him to love his brethren, esteem them more highly than himself, prefer their honor to his own, and gladly give himself to serve their interests (Philippians 2:3–8).

REPENTANCE (v. 21)—"Repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" always go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other. It is only through "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" that sinners obtain eternal salvation. Both are necessary. Both are vital. Both are gifts of God's grace. True repentance is "toward God." Paul did not say, "I preached repentance." He said, "I preached repentance toward God," because there is a repentance that is not toward God. There is a legal repentance that is no more than a sense of guilt, a dread of God's wrath, and a fear of Hell. But repentance toward God is produced by the goodness of God (Romans 2:4), not the wrath of God. It comes from the revelation of redemption by Christ (Zechariah 12:10), not from the fear of judgment. Repentance, in its essence, is a change of heart toward God, as illustrated in the prodigal son (Luke 15:14–20), the publican (Luke 18:13), and David (Psalm 51:4). Repentance is the honest acknowledgment and confession of sin to God (1 John 1:9). It is an acknowledgment by a person that he has offended God by his sin, that his very heart is enmity against God, and that it is right for God to punish his sin (Psalm 51:4; Romans 8:7). Repentance is sitting in judgment with God against yourself, abhorring yourself by reason of your sin, and pleading for mercy on the basis of pure grace through the merits of Christ alone. Only God himself can cause a person thus to repent (Acts 5:31; Jeremiah 31:18; Lamentations 5:21).

FAITH (v. 21)—"Faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" is the gift, work, and operation of God the Holy Spirit within saved sinners (Ephesians 1:19; 2:8; Colossians 2:12). "Faith toward Christ" is the believer's confidence in Christ as Savior and Lord. It involves knowledge of the Person and work of Christ, for you cannot trust a Savior you do not know. That knowledge that is essential to saving faith comes by hearing the Word of God preached (Romans 10:17) in the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:5). And faith is the agreement of a person's heart with the gospel, which causes him to trust the blood and righteousness of Christ alone as the grounds of his acceptance with God. Both repentance and faith are continual, progressive, growing, and persevering graces. They are not isolated acts or events in life. They are characteristic attitudes of every believer's life. The believer continually looks to God with repentance and continually looks to God through Christ in faith, trusting his propitiatory sacrifice, providential rule, heavenly intercession, and Word of promise.

COMMITMENT (v. 24)—Believers are men and women who are consecrated to Christ and his gospel. They are committed to him. As men and women who love one another commit themselves to one another in marriage, so believers, loving Christ, commit themselves to him. Paul was convinced that the gospel of God's grace and the cause of Christ's glory in this world is worthy of the ultimate sacrifice of life itself. Ultimately, he made that sacrifice (2 Timothy 4:6–8). Let every sinner saved by the grace of God follow his example. The experience of God's mercy, love, and grace in Christ demands the commitment of our lives to him (Romans 12:1–2).

GENEROSITY (v. 35)—God's saints are a generous, giving people. Grace makes people generous. Find a person who has the grace of God in his heart, and you will find a person who serves the cause of God and the people of God with open heart and open hand. Find a person who is tight fisted with his money, miserly with his possessions, and ever seeking to increase his riches, and you will find a person who does not know God. Search the Scriptures for yourself and see if grace and generosity do not go together (James 2:14–17; 1 John 3:16–18).

61. "TAKE HEED"

Acts 20:26–35

When Paul called the Ephesian elders together at Miletus, his object was to impart to them some final words of instruction by which they might be enabled to serve God and his people in their generation. Paul's words of instruction on that momentous occasion have been preserved for us in this chapter so that we too might know how to serve our God and Savior, his church, and his interests in our generation. If we would do so, there are certain things to which we must "take heed", knowing that Satan will constantly attempt to draw us away from Christ by drawing us away from our responsibilities in this world. In particular, the apostle, speaking by inspiration of God the Holy Spirit, tells us that there are three things to which we must "take heed": the ministry of the gospel, the church of God, and the words of the Lord Jesus.

THE MINISTRY OF THE GOSPEL (verses 26–31)—Certainly, Paul's primary object here is the instruction of elders, pastors and teachers, regarding their responsibilities as God's servants. Every God called preacher must "take heed to the ministry which (he) has received in the Lord" to fulfill it (Colossians 4:17; 1 Timothy 4:12–16). However, it is also the responsibility of God's people to know, follow, and obey those who labor among them (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; Hebrews 13:7, 17). Paul tells us three things about every true gospel preacher, every true pastor in the church of God.

1. God's servants are watchmen over his church and watchmen over the souls of men (verses 26–27; Hebrews 13:17; Ezekiel 3:15–21; 33:1–16). The work of a watchman is not mysterious. He has but one thing to do. He must watch over the camp. God says, "You shall hear the Word at my mouth, and warn them from me." When Paul gave account of himself, he simply said, "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." The word he received from God, he faithfully declared. He kept back nothing. That is the whole work of the ministry. A faithful pastor is a man who seeks a word from God for his people and faithfully delivers that word. He seeks and finds his message in the Bible alone and faithfully declares the message of Holy Scripture. The phrase, "all the counsel of God", is the gospel of the crucified Redeemer (1 Corinthians 2:7). God's watchmen proclaim to eternity bound men and women the message of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

2. Pastors are the spiritual rulers and overseers of God's house (v. 28). It is every pastor's responsibility to take the oversight of the church he serves (1 Peter 5:13). The care of the house of God is his responsibility. He is to rule the church of God in exactly the same way a husband is to rule his house (1 Timothy 3:4–5). A pastor must rule by example and in love. He must win the respect of men and women, so that they are willing to be ruled by him. And he must rule by the Word of God. But rule he must! The church is not to be ruled by the voice of the people, but by the voice of God through his messenger. Read Numbers 16:1–35 and see how serious God makes this matter to be!

As the overseer of God's church, it is the pastor's responsibility to feed the church. Many fleece the church. God's servants feed it with knowledge and understanding (Jeremiah 3:15). He must feed God's people with the knowledge of pure gospel doctrine and with an understanding of their peculiar needs. Such knowledge and understanding can be gained only by prayer and study. Therefore, the pastor must give himself entirely to this work (1 Timothy 4:12–16).

3. God's preachers are set as pastors for the protection of his church (verses 29–31; Ephesians 4:14; 2 Timothy 3:1–4:5). As shepherds watch over their sheep, so true pastors watch over the flock of Christ's sheep to protect them from the pernicious, subtle, cunning doctrines of wolves. These wolves (false prophets) come from many quarters, wearing many different names, but they always have four things in common: (1) They deny God's total and absolute sovereignty. (2) They deny the effectual accomplishment of redemption by the blood of Christ. (3) They deny the efficacy of God's grace in salvation. (4) They give sinners something to do to make the blood of Christ and the grace of God personally efficacious.

THE CHURCH OF GOD (v. 28)—The church of God is a spiritual society, a family of believers. The only bond holding its members together is their relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ. It cannot be denied that the word "church" is used in at least three ways in the New Testament. (1) It is used to describe all true believers of all ages, both those of the Old Testament and those of the New, both on earth and in Heaven. This is what we call "the universal church". It is the mystical, spiritual body of which Christ is the Head (

Ephesians 1:22; 5:25–27; Hebrews 12:23–24). (2) The word "church" is also used to describe local, visible assemblies of all professed believers in a given place. In a local church, there are both believers and unbelievers, true possessors of faith and mere professors of faith. Yet, every local assembly of professed believers is set forth as a local church in the New Testament, and is called "the church of God" (Romans 16:1–5). (3) The word "church" is also used to describe all local churches at any given time in the world (1 Corinthians 10:32; 12:28). That does not mean that all religions, or all denominations together make up the church of God. However, all true churches, worshiping God in the pattern and doctrine of the New Testament, are one.

In Acts 20:28 Paul is addressing the elders of a particular local assembly at Ephesus, or perhaps, as noted before, these elders were preachers from several local assemblies in the Ephesus area. He calls this body of believers "the church of God". Two things are here revealed about the church of God.

1. It belongs to God. He chose it (2 Thessalonians 2:13). He bought it with his own blood (Ephesians 5:25–27; Titus 2:14). And he calls it out of the world in effectual grace (Colossians 1:12–14).

2. The church of God is a flock of sheep. Before we were converted, God's saints were lost sheep, straying from him. After conversion, believers are compared to sheep because they are meek, inoffensive, patient, and entirely dependent upon their Shepherd, Christ Jesus.

"THE WORDS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST" (verses 33–35)—In verse 35 Paul refers to one of the statements made by Christ that was commonly known to his disciples, though it was nowhere recorded in the four gospels. But, read together, verses 33–35 teach us three facts that need to be recognized and remembered.

1. God's servants are not greedy, covetous men; and they are not beggars (v. 33). Paul did not seek luxury, or even comfort. But he would not grovel before men. He would either be maintained by the free, voluntary gifts of God's people; or he would work to provide for his necessities. But he refused to beg!

2. Every believing man ought to labor as one working not for himself, but for the glory of God and to help others (v. 35). Every man is responsible to work and provide for himself and his family (1 Timothy 5:8; 2 Thessalonians 3:10). We should each labor with diligence, not to amass great wealth, but, like Paul, to have the means to support those who preach the gospel and those who are less fortunate. Believers should work with their hands so that they may have the means to give to those who are in need (Ephesians 4:28). This is love indeed (1 John 3:16–19).

3. Ever remember, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" because the person who gives generously, with a willing heart, by his gifts, gives evidence that he is born of God; whereas the person who receives, but does not give, by hoarding God's bounty for himself, proves that he does not know God (1 John 3:16–19).

62. "THE WILL OF THE LORD BE DONE"

Acts 21:1–40

Paul was en route to Jerusalem, knowing fully that upon his arrival there he would meet with vehement opposition because of the gospel he preached (Acts 20:22–24). But he would allow nothing to keep him from doing what he knew God had called and directed him to do. After his brief stay at Miletus (Acts 20:17–38), he sailed down the west coast of Asia Minor, stopping at Coos, Rhodes, and Patara. From there they sailed around the Island of Cyprus to Tyre, in Syria. Finding disciples there, he and his companions tarried at Tyre for seven days. Read Acts 21:1–4.

AT TYRE, THE DISCIPLES WARNED PAUL NOT TO GO UP TO JERUSALEM (verses 4–5). Without question, they gave this warning "to Paul through the Spirit." Neither can it be doubted that Paul was "bound in the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem. There is only one way to understand this apparent contradiction—These warnings given to Paul by the Holy Spirit were given to try and prove his faith and faithfulness so that he might stand as an example to others. After the warning was given and Paul could not be dissuaded, the disciples at Tyre, with their families, prayed with Paul and bid him farewell, submitting to the will of the Lord.

AFTER LEAVING TYRE, PAUL AND HIS FRIENDS CAME TO CAESAREA, WHERE THEY WERE THE GUESTS OF PHILIP THE EVANGELIST (verses 7–9). Philip was one of the original deacons (Acts 6:5). Later he became an evangelist. He is the one who was sent of God to preach the gospel to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. The last we saw of him, he was settled in Caesarea (Acts 8:40). Now, some twenty or more years later, he was still there, serving the Lord with a family of four daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

This servant of God was a married man. Contrary to papal doctrine, which forbids the marriage of God's servants, almost all the pastors, deacons, and evangelists of the New Testament were married men (1 Timothy 4:1–5).

Philip, being given to hospitality, graciously opened his home to Paul and his traveling companions. Grace makes people gracious and generous. Philip counted it an honor and privilege to have God's servants and his saints as guests in his home. Happy is the home and household where the servants of God and the people of God are frequent guests. Where God's servants and his people are lodged, blessings are lodged (Matthew 10:41–42; Hebrews 13:1–2).

Philip's virgin daughters prophesied. There is no indication that these girls had taken a vow of virginity! They were simply young women who were not yet married and were virgins, as all unmarried women should be. These young ladies had a gift of prophecy. That does not imply that they taught and explained the Scriptures, or preached in the public assemblies of the church. That would have been a direct violation of the Word of God (1 Corinthians 15:34–35; 1 Timothy 2:11–12). When Luke tells us they "did prophesy", he simply means that they had the gift to foretell future events by the Spirit of God. This was one of the many extraordinary signs of the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy in apostolic times (Joel 2:28). We can only guess what the subject of their prophecy was, but the context helps us. Like the disciples at Tyre (v. 4) and Aqabus (v. 11), Philip's daughters probably warned Paul of the danger awaiting him at Jerusalem. Over and over again the Holy Spirit plainly told Paul the things he would face at Jerusalem. He knew that certain death awaited him (Acts 20:25).

While he was still at Caesarea in Philip's house, AGABUS CAME DOWN FROM JUDEA AND PROPHESIED OF PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT AT JERUSALEM (verses 11–14). Paul had met Agabus fifteen or sixteen years earlier at Antioch. It was Agabus who had prophesied of the famine that came in the days of Claudias Caesar (Acts 11:28). Paul was familiar with this man and fully aware of his Divine commission and gifts. Agabus publicly prophesied that Paul would be bound by the Jews and delivered up to the Romans. The disciples were heart broken for Paul's sake. They tenderly and urgently begged him not to proceed with his plans. But Paul would not be dissuaded. He was committed to Christ and determined to obey that which he knew to be the will of God, even if it cost him his life (v. 13; Acts 20:22–24). Seeing Paul's determination, all the disciples submitted to the will of the Lord. They would not be found in rebellion to God. This is the spirit of faith. It is the spirit of Christ (Matthew 26:42). All who believe God submit to the will of God, preferring his will to their will because his will is best.

AT LAST PAUL WENT UP TO JERUSALEM, WHERE HE WAS COMPELLED BY JAMES TO GIVE APPROVAL TO THE OBSERVANCE OF THE MOSAIC LAW (verses 15–40). Carefully read Acts 21:17–26. It is one of the saddest paragraphs in the Bible. A terrible, tragic thing is about to take place. No man was a greater, or more consistent exponent of the believer's freedom from the law than Paul. Yet, he is about to go back under the yoke of bondage!

James and the elders at Jerusalem persuaded Paul that, in order to conciliate the Jews and put an end to the scandalous reports they had heard about him, he should give public approval to the observance of the ceremonial law of Moses. They compelled him to go into the temple with four men who had taken a Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:2, 13) and offer a sacrifice of purification; and Paul did it!

Without question, this action was contrary to everything Paul taught (Galatians 2:3, 11; 3:1–3; 5:1; Colossians 2:16). By example and by association, Paul gave approval to legalism. His action could only encourage others to retain the spirit of legalism and both confuse and dishearten the Gentile believers. To this day, legalists point to this passage as an argument why we should live under the yoke of the law.

Why did Paul submit to this legal ceremony? The believing Jews had not yet seen the destruction of the temple. During this time of transition, most Jewish believers continued to observe the customs of the law. God virtually had to break their hands to get them to let go of Moses and the carnal ceremonies of the law. But why did Paul, who knew better, do this horrible thing?

No doubt, he was trying to be conciliatory to the believing Jews who were yet weak in the faith (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). That is commendable. Those who are weak in the faith are to be borne with in patience. We must do nothing to offend them. But we must not, even for the sake of nurturing the weak, do that which is contrary to the gospel of Christ or in violation of our own conscience. We can do without wine or meat to keep a brother from stumbling; but we cannot and must not pretend to live by legal principles to keep from offending a legalist! If we join others in committing evil and compromise the gospel of grace in the name of Christian love, we will not help them, and are likely to hinder many others. In addition to those things, Paul was probably simply tired of fighting with his brethren over the law. He finally gave in; but he regretted it. His strongest instructions about the believer's total freedom from the law in Christ were written after this incident.

Besides, the compromise did not work (verses 27–40). It never does! The Jews were not conciliated. It is a vain thing to imagine that men can be pleased and that their approval of the gospel can be won by compromise. However, it must not be forgotten that God graciously overruled even this sad blemish in Paul's life to accomplish his purpose. This too proved to be good for Paul, good for God's elect, and for the glory of God. Had he not gone into the temple that day, he would not have been arrested, he would not have gone to Rome, he would not have written his prison epistles, he would not have been martyred for Christ. Without question, God brought good out of evil; and he still does!

63. SURRENDER

Acts 21:13–16

Faith in Christ is nothing less than the surrender of one's life to the rule and dominion of Jesus Christ as Lord. It is that implicit confidence in him that causes a person to trust Christ to control all the affairs of his life. Faith is losing your life to Christ. Anything short of the surrender of heart and life to Jesus Christ as Lord is not faith (Matthew 10:37–38; Mark 7:24–28; Luke 9:23–24; 14:25–33; John 12:25). In Acts 21:13–16, Luke gives us several examples of that surrender of life that always accompanies true faith.

Paul, being "bound in the Spirit" to go (Acts 20:22), was on his way to Jerusalem. He did not know exactly what awaited him there. But the Holy Spirit assured him that "bonds and afflictions" (Acts 20:23) would certainly be waiting for him. Still, this faithful servant of God was determined to finish his course with the joyful awareness that he had been obedient to Christ, no matter what difficulties and dangers awaited him.

All along the way the Lord tested his resolve and proved his faith. First, the disciples at Tyre pleaded with Paul, urging him not to go up to Jerusalem because the Holy Spirit had shown them the danger awaiting him (v. 4). Then, Agabus came down to Caesarea and made a very bold and vivid prophecy of the bonds awaiting Paul at Jerusalem (verses 10–11). After that, all the disciples began to weep and begged Paul not to go up to Jerusalem (v. 12). The disciples at Tyre, Agabus, and these disciples at Caesarea were all spiritual men. They all had Paul's best interest at heart. They all spoke to him by the Spirit of God. But Paul new what the will of God was. And he was determined to do God's will, regardless of cost or consequence. What an example he sets before us! When God has shown us his will, when the path of our responsibility is clear, we must be obedient and walk in it, no matter what it may cost us to do so. Nothing will justify the neglect of disobedience to the known will of God (1 Kings 13:26).

TRUE FAITH INVOLVES A LOVING COMMITMENT AND SURRENDER OF LIFE TO THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. When Paul called upon the saints at Rome to present their bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord (Romans 12:1–2), he had already done so. His life was a life of self-sacrificing devotion to Christ, as verse 13 indicates. "Then answered Paul, What mean you to weep and to break mine heart? For I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

The Lord Jesus Christ is worthy of all that we might be called upon to do or suffer for him, and infinitely more. This is an obvious fact to all who know him. It is not something that has to be proved. He who is worthy of heaven's highest praise is worthy of our hearts' highest love, esteem, and devotion. He is worthy of our full surrender to his claims and total commitment to his glory. He is worthy because of who he is, God over all and blessed forever, our incarnate Mediator and Substitute (Isaiah 9:6–7; John 1:1–3, 14; Philippians 2:6–8; Colossians 2:9; 1 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 1:1–3). He is worthy because of all that he has done for us: his suretyship engagements (Hebrews 10:5–14), his assumption of our nature (2 Corinthians 8:9; Galatians 4:4–5), his representative obedience (Romans 5:19), and his sin-atoning, substitutionary, sacrificial death (Romans 5:6–8; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; Galatians 3:13). He is worthy because of all that he is doing and shall yet do for us: his advocacy (1 John 2:1–2), his providential rule (John 17:2), his preparation of Heaven for us (John 14:1–3), the resurrection of the saints (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18), and the perfection of glorification (Ephesians 5:25–27). When we think of who Christ is, what he has done, and what he has promised, we are compelled to shout with the saints in Heaven, "You are worthy!"

True faith loves and esteems the Son of God above all things, even above life itself. To those who believe, "He is precious" (1 Peter 2:7). Faith perceives the infinite worth of Christ and the comparative worthlessness of all but Christ (Philippians 3:4–11). I realize that there are varying degrees of consecration to Christ, and that believers grow in grace; but wherever grace is experienced, indebtedness is felt (Luke 7:36–50). The believer is never satisfied with anything done for or given to Christ. Love yearns to give more, do more, surrender more, and be more for Christ. Faith can never be satisfied with anything less than total commitment to Christ, total communion with Christ, and total conformity to Christ. Faith counts that kind of devotion to be a very reasonable thing (Romans 12:1–2; 14:7–8; 2 Corinthians 5:15).

TRUE FAITH SURRENDERS TO THE WILL OF GOD. When the disciples realized that Paul could not be persuaded to follow the course of personal safety, they submitted their friend, the cause of Christ, and their own lives to the will of God, saying, "The will of the Lord be done" (v. 14). Even so, it is our responsibility and in our best interest to submit all things to the will of God. It is an act of faith to submit all our plans to his will (James 4:15). And it is an act of patience to humbly endure personal trials, troubles, and heartaches realizing that all that we suffer, we suffer by the will of God (1 Samuel 3:15). As we seek to walk in obedience to the will of God, three things need to be understood.

1. THE SECRET WILL OF GOD is his eternal purpose and decree of predestination. God is the first cause of all things (Romans 11:36; 2 Corinthians 5:18; Ephesians 1:11). Some things are permitted by God; and some things are directly caused by God; but all things were decreed by God in his eternal purpose (Isaiah 46:9–11).

2. THE REVEALED WILL OF GOD is that which we are responsible to obey. Our responsibility is determined not by the decree of God, but by the revelation of God. We are responsible to do what we know God has commanded us to do in his Word (John 2:5). For example: All men are responsible to repent (Acts 17:30). All believers are responsible to be baptized, confessing and identifying with Christ in the watery grave (Acts 2:38). And all who know Christ are responsible to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). Once we know God's will in any area of life, we must obey, without consideration of cost or consequence.

3. THE PROVIDENTIAL WILL OF GOD is whatever comes to pass in time. All that comes to pass is brought to pass by the will of God (Romans 8:28; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). It is our responsibility to trust God's will of purpose, obey God's will of revelation, and submit to God's will of providence, saying, "The will of the Lord be done."

TRUE FAITH PERSEVERES TO THE END. Verse 16 speaks of "one Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple with whom" Paul lodged at Jerusalem. What charming words! If I should live to be an old man, let me live to be "an old disciple". I want no more. "Mnason" means "one who remembers". He had seen, heard, learned, and experienced much of Christ, of redemption, and of grace. What precious memories he must have enjoyed! He came from the little island of Cyprus, the home of Barnabas. And he was "an old disciple". Those words imply that he was a man advanced in years; but literally they mean he was "a disciple from the beginning." Mnason was one of the original group of believers. Thirty years had passed since the death of Christ. Mnason was one of the very few left who had seen, heard, and believed Christ in the flesh. Most of his old buddies were gone already to Heaven. But Mnason was still a disciple. He was still learning from his Master, following his Master, and growing in grace. He was still given to hospitality, and a man so highly esteemed in the church that his acceptance of Paul carried such weight that the Jewish brethren received him gladly (v. 17). Thank God for old disciples!

64. PAUL'S DEFENSE OF THE FAITH

Acts 22:1–30

Acts 22 opens with Paul standing before an angry religious mob. Bound with chains like a dangerous criminal, he beckoned to the people with his hand and got their attention (Acts 21:40). Then, he gave a solemn and powerful defense of the faith. Speaking in calm, conciliatory terms in the Hebrew tongue, Paul addressed these angry Jews as brethren. Though they were not his brethren in any spiritual sense, they were in a natural sense. Paul spoke to them as he did because he wanted to calm their tempers and incline them to listen to what he had to say. In that, he was successful (verses 1–2).

Take special notice of the simplicity of Paul's language as you read this chapter. Though he was a very well trained intellectual, capable of fetching arguments and illustrations from history, tradition, philosophy, literature, logic, and theological orthodoxy, though he was capable of using poetic imagery, oratorical eloquence, and stunning imagination, he carefully avoided doing so (1 Corinthians 2:4–5). In this dramatic moment, the great apostle to the Gentiles simply told the story of his conversion. He told his hearers, in the most simple language possible, what God had done for him by his almighty, free grace in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the way the gospel ought always to be preached. And that is the way we ought to witness to men. The very best defense of the faith is the testimony of men and women who have experienced the transforming power of God's saving grace in Christ and know it. To be a good preacher, a man must simply tell what he knows. To be a good witness for Christ, saved sinners must simply tell other sinners what they know (

John 9:25). Three spiritual lessons are clearly set before us in this chapter.

First, A PERSON MAY BE VERY RELIGIOUS AND YET BE LOST (verses 1–5). It is entirely possible for a person to be well learned in the letter of Holy Scripture, consecrated and devoted to the point of self-denial, and very zealous toward God without knowing God. The angry mob Paul was addressing was a mob of zealous religionists who did not know God. In verses 3–5, Paul told them that before God saved him he was just like them—"As you all are this day." He was born and reared in a strictly orthodox Jewish family. "I am truly a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia." He had a religious pedigree that was unrivaled (Philippians 3:4–6). His mother and father were respected, loyal members of the synagogue. He had been religious all his life. But grace does not run in blood lines. Grace does not come by natural decent (John 1:11–13). Paul was very well trained in the letter of the law too. "Brought up in this city (Jerusalem) at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law." He knew the Scriptures. He was strictly moral. His life was an example of moral and religious purity. He was a Pharisee who lived such a good life that he even made other Pharisees look impure! Paul was raised in religion and raised to be religious. But he did not know God, though he was sure he did. Faith cannot be learned. It must be given (Philippians 1:29). Salvation is not the result of training, but of revelation (2 Corinthians 4:5–6). Moreover, Paul was devoted, consecrated, and zealous in performing his religious works. He was "zealous toward God." He was not a sham professor of religion. He did not take the things of God lightly. He gave himself wholeheartedly to the pursuit of his religious profession (verses 4–5). But grace cannot be earned by religious works (Romans 3:20; 11:6; Ephesians 2:8–9). Without question, Paul was a religious man from his youth; but he was without God, without Christ, without life, lost in the world (Ephesians 2:12). In spite of his religion, Paul obtained mercy and never lost a sense of amazement at the mercy he had obtained (1 Timothy 1:12–17). It may be that as you read these lines you are made to realize that you are like Paul—religious but lost! If you would be saved, you must have something more than religion. You must have Christ (John 17:3; Colossians 1:27; 1 John 5:11–12).

Second, "SALVATION IS OF THE LORD" (verses 6–21). In verses 3–5, Paul tells us what he was before God saved him. In verses 6–21, he tells us what God did for him and in him by his almighty grace in Christ. From start to finish, the apostle ascribes the whole of his salvation to the grace of God. The essence of everything he says in these verses is—"By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10). In these verses, the servant of God tells us four specific things in which he stands as "a pattern to them which should hereafter believe" (1 Timothy 1:16).

1. Paul was confronted in his path of rebellion by the sovereign Christ, the living Lord (verses 6–11). Sooner or later, God will cross the path of every chosen sinner. Notice the words at the beginning of verse 6—"And it came to pass." What came to pass? God's eternal purpose of grace toward Paul. How did it come to pass? By God's gracious hand of providence. Here again we see a marvelous display of God's providence overruling evil for good. Paul went to Damascus full of hatred for Christ. But Christ brought him down the Damascus road because the time of love had come when Saul of Tarsus must be saved (Ezekiel 16:8). He was not seeking the Lord. The Lord was seeking him. At the time appointed, and in the place appointed, the Lord Jesus revealed himself to this chosen, redeemed sinner in sovereign grace and saving power. Overwhelmed by the dazzling revelation of Christ's glory, confronted with the claims of Christ's lordship, called by the personal, particular, and effectual call of the Savior, Saul of Tarsus was broken in repentance.

2. By the instruction of a faithful, gospel preacher, Paul was granted spiritual illumination and given understanding in the gospel (verses 12–15). Even in Paul's case the rule of grace was not broken. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17). He had heard the gospel from the lips of Stephen (Acts 7:1–59). But now he heard it from Ananias. Though he had learned the letter of the Word at the feet of Gamaliel, Saul was as ignorant of spiritual truth as any barbarian. Spiritual truth must be spiritually revealed and spiritually learned (1 Corinthians 2:11–16). And God's appointed means by which the Holy Spirit teaches spiritual truth is the ministry of the gospel (Ephesians 4:11–14). The very first thing Ananias taught Paul was GOD'S ELECTING GRACE. "The God of our fathers has chosen you." Then he told him that THE OBJECT OF ELECTION IS SALVATION—"That you should know his will." That is his revealed will, the gospel, how that through Christ's blood atonement God can be just and the Justifier of all who trust his Son (Romans 3:24–26). Next, Ananias told Paul that SALVATION COMES BY KNOWING CHRIST, the sinners' Substitute, the only Mediator between God and men, by seeing "that Just One" (John 17:3). Next, he talked about an EFFECTUAL CALL, "and should hear the voice of his mouth." The only way any sinner can ever know Christ is by the call of his Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:4–5; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14; Psalm 65:4). Finally, Ananias told Paul that God had chosen him "to be HIS WITNESS." That is the lifelong business of every saved sinner (Isaiah 44:8; John 20:21).

3. Paul then confessed Christ in public, believer's baptism (v. 16). Baptism has no saving, redeeming efficacy; but it is a symbolic picture of the washing away of the believer's sins by the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

4. Being a believer, Paul was led by and walked in the Spirit (verses 17–21). Believers are men and women whose lives are ruled by Jesus Christ through the indwelling power and grace of God the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9–16).

Third, in verses 22–30, the Holy Spirit once more shows us that THE GOSPEL OF THE GRACE OF GOD IS AN OFFENCE TO UNREGENERATE MEN. The message of grace which Paul preached to these religious people, his testimony of the grace he had experienced in Christ, enraged them. Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone always infuriates lost, religious people, but the saints of God rejoice in it (1 Corinthians 1:22–24).

65. "I WAS FREE BORN"

Acts 22:22–28

"And they gave him audience unto this word." Paul had been telling the Jews how that God saved him by his free grace and sovereign mercy in Christ. And they listened with relative patience until he told them how God, in his glorious sovereignty, had rejected Israel as a nation and sent the gospel to his elect among the Gentiles (verses 17–21). When they heard that God has mercy on whom he will, without regard to human merit, religious rearing, family descent, or racial heritage, they were engaged. Fallen men are always enraged by the declaration of God's sovereignty in the exercise of his grace (Luke 4:25–29). Hearing that God had rejected them and had chosen to save worthless Gentiles, these self-righteous Jews were filled with rage. They began to act like wild beasts. They cried out, "Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live!" As they screamed for Paul's blood, they tore off their clothes, preparing to stone him to death, and threw dust into the air. Their hatred of God's sovereign character nearly drove them insane. They could not get their hands around God's throat, so they tried to kill Paul.

Then the chief captain commanded one of his soldiers to bring Paul into the castle to beat a confession out of him (v. 24). As they were preparing to do so, Paul said, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned?" (v. 25). Of course, it was not. The thought of beating a Roman citizen was horrifying to the soldier. He ran to tell his commanding officer, "You ordered us to beat a Roman citizen." That scared the chief captain too. He came to Paul and said, "Are you a Roman? He said, Yes. And the chief captain answered, with great sum obtained I this freedom. And Paul said, But I was free born" (verses 27–28). He was born in Tarsus, a free city, which had been declared free by Mark Antony, long before Paul was born.

For the purpose of this study, I take these words as coming, not from the mouth of Saul of Tarsus, a citizen of Rome, but as coming from the mouth of Paul the believer, a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem. What Paul here says of himself every true believer may joyfully declare concerning himself—"I was free born." We are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. The Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Heaven, has declared that City to be free by the power of his blood. And he did it long before we were born. Being free born citizens of the kingdom of Heaven, we will never be brought into bondage (Galatians 5:1). Four things are clearly revealed in the New Testament about this spiritual freedom that need to be understood by every child of God.

ALL MEN AND WOMEN BY NATURE ARE IN BONDAGE. Man loves to boast of freedom, independence, and liberty. But all men are, in a spiritual sense, object slaves by nature. All are in bondage to sin (Romans 6:20), the servants of "the lusts of the flesh" (Ephesians 2:3). Those who serve their own passions are slaves to the worst possible despot. Yet, by nature we are all ruled by the evil passions of our own depraved hearts. Having broken God's law, all are in bondage to the law and under the curse of the law (Galatians 3:10), under the sentence of death (Romans 6:23). To one degree or another, all of us are natural slaves to other men, craving their approval, acceptance, and applause. And all men and women are slaves to religious tradition custom, and superstition by nature. The maxim of the humanist is true: "Man believes what he is raised to believe." Religion is a cultural thing. It is passed on from father to son, generation after generation. This natural, cultural, environmental religion brings people into terrible bondage. The Lord Jesus Christ came into this world to set the captive free, to open the doors of the prison, break the iron chains and steel fetters, and bring his people into freedom and liberty, even "the glorious liberty of the sons of God" (

Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:16–20).

CHRIST ALONE MAKES SINNERS FREE. No one ever comes to enjoy true liberty before God and in his own conscience, except by the blood, righteousness, and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. But we must beware of false liberty. Every good thing is imitated by Satan; and he has deceived many with a false liberty. Some are so naive that they imagine a mere profession of faith is liberty. Others presume they have found liberty when they have mended their lives by self-righteous reformation, ceasing from certain evil habits of outward behavior. Some even substitute a spirit of licentiousness in the name of grace for spiritual freedom. But neither legalism nor antinomianism, nor empty religious profession can bring true liberty. Only Christ, the Son of God, can make sinners free (John 8:36). He purchased liberty for God's elect by his sin-atoning death as our Substitute (Galatians 3:13). He proclaims liberty to sinners through the preaching of the gospel (Isaiah 61:1–3). And he sets his people free by the power of his sovereign grace through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, who causes awakened sinners to know him who is the Truth (John 8:32).

ALL WHO ARE BORN OF GOD ARE BORN FREE, born into freedom (Galatians 4:1–7). The moment a person is born again he is a child of God, and is free in Christ. The moment a sinner believes on the Lord Jesus Christ he begins to enjoy a real and lasting freedom in his soul. As the believer grows and matures, he enjoys his liberty more freely and appreciates it better. But the liberty is his as soon as he trusts Christ.

In Christ, we are free from sin, Satan, and the law. Christ has freed us from the guilt, condemnation, and dominion of sin (Hebrews 9:14; Romans 8:1; Ephesians 2:1–5; Romans 6:11–18). Our Savior has delivered us from the power and tyranny of Satan too. By nature, Satan holds a usurped dominion over all men, blinding them, deceiving them, and leading them into captivity at his will. In salvation, Christ dethrones the devil by the power of his Spirit. He enters the hearts of his elect, binds the strong man and takes possession of his house (Luke 11:21–22). And the Son of God has freed his people from the Mosaic law (Romans 5:20–21; 6:15; 7:4; 8:1–2; 10:4). The New Testament never addresses God's saints as people under the law, but always as people free from the law: free from the statutes of Old Testament judicial law, free from the ceremonies of the law, free from the bondage of the moral law. Believers in Christ have no covenant with the law, no condemnation by the law, no constraint from the law, and no obligation to the law. Christ satisfied all things in the law for us. The lives of God's saints are not governed by the rules and regulations of the law, but by love and faith in Christ, and the glory of God (1 John 3:23; 2 Corinthians 5:14; 1 Corinthians 10:31). However, according to the New Testament, our freedom in Christ extends far beyond these matters of doctrine, and reaches to the common affairs of everyday life. Faith in Christ gives us freedom from all the customs, traditions, and superstitions of human religion. We are not to be the servants of self-righteous, religious traditions and customs. We are duty bound to repudiate them (Matthew 15:1–9; Colossians 2:6–8, 16–17, 20–23). Neither the church of God nor gospel preachers have any right to develop laws and rules of conduct for God's people. To do so is to add to the Word of God. In Christ we are free to use every creature of God for food, happiness, satisfaction, and comfort as we seek to serve him in this world. Old Testament Levitical law made the use of some things unlawful. But in this gospel age, for the believer, there is nothing common or unclean (Acts 10:14–15; Romans 14:14; 1 Timothy 4:1–4). Use all things in moderation. Carefully avoid offending a weaker brother. Make your use of all things subservient to the glory of God and the welfare of his church. But understand that you are free to use God's creation as his child (Romans 14:2–3, 13–15, 20–23; 1 Corinthians 8:9–13). Christ has given us the freedom to worship God (Ephesians 2:18; Hebrews 4:16): freedom to call upon God in prayer, freedom to observe the ordinances of his house, and freedom to serve him. Furthermore, being born of God, in Christ, believers are made free from the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14–15). Being justified by his grace, redeemed by his blood, robed in his righteousness, and born of his Spirit, the second death has no power over God's elect (Rev. 20:6; John 5:25).

However, THERE IS A GLORIOUS LIBERTY YET TO BE REVEALED (Romans 8:21–23). In Heaven we shall be totally free from sin and everything sinful. But when Christ comes and makes all things new, in our resurrected, glorified bodies, in immortality and glory, we shall be completely freed from all the consequences of sin. That will be "the glorious liberty of the sons of God!"

66. PAUL AND HIS ENEMIES

Acts 23:1–35

It is faith in God's sovereign providence that enables believers to live in this world of woe with peaceful hearts. "We know," beyond the least shadow of a doubt, "that all things," without exception, "work together for good," eternal, spiritual good, "to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). God is on his throne! Though we cannot always see immediate good in what he does, we know that he is doing good. Therefore, our hearts are kept in peace, even in the midst of troubles, trials, and temptations. One marked feature of the Book of Acts is its evident display of God's sovereign providence constantly bringing good out of evil for the accomplishment of his own purposes. Acts 23 gives us an instructive example of this fact. Four things are set before us in these thirty-five verses of Inspiration that need to be clearly understood and constantly remembered.

First, THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST IS OFFENSIVE TO MEN (verses 1–10). We must always carefully avoid offensive attitudes, actions, and words. But we must never expect natural men and women to receive, embrace, or even be tolerant of the gospel of Christ. Natural men are tolerant of every opinion and every religion of man's making. But the gospel of Christ, the truth of God, the religion of the Bible, the message of free salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, the message of salvation by blood atonement, imputed righteousness, and divine regeneration is offensive to all unregenerate men (1 Corinthians 1:18–25). It is offensive because men, by nature, hate God (Romans 8:7). The gospel of Christ exposes man's depravity, sin, and spiritual impotence (Matthew 15:19; Romans 3:9–19; Ephesians 2:1–4). It nullifies man's goodness, reveals the evil of man's righteousness, and denounces man's religion as a worthless thing (Isaiah 1:2–15; Amos 5:21–23). The gospel proclaims that salvation is by grace alone, without works (Romans 11:5–6; Ephesians 2:8–9; 2 Timothy 1:9). These things the natural man will not tolerate. The terrible uproar at Jerusalem was caused by one thing. Paul had preached God's sovereign, electing, distinguishing, saving grace and the Jews hated it. Enraged, they cried, "Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live" (Acts 22:20–22; Luke 4:25–29). With that as the background, read Paul's speech before the Jewish Sanhedrin and its results again (verses 1–10).

Admire the boldness of God's servant (verses 1–5). The Roman commander brought Paul in and set him before this bloodthirsty mob to be examined by them. But Paul was not intimidated. Even in bonds, he was bold for Christ. He told these men that his life had always been one of integrity, which they all knew to be true (v. 1). Throughout his life, Paul was a man of principle. He was saying, "I have always done what I thought was right for the glory of God." Even before he was converted, he did what he did with zeal for God, though his zeal lacked knowledge (Philippians 3:6). As soon as Paul said that, Ananias commanded him to be hit in the mouth (v. 2). Paul responded in a blaze of anger and indignation, "God shall smite you, you whited wall" (v. 3). He called Ananias a hypocrite (Matthew 23:27) because he pretended to judge according to the law, but commanded him to be smitten contrary to the law. NOTE: Self-righteous men who pretend to live by the law and judge others according to the law are hypocrites, for none of them obey the law (1 Timothy 1:6–7; Galatians 6:12–13).

This word from Paul was obviously an inspired word of prophecy. Five years later, this man, Ananias, was stabbed to death. Even so, there is a day coming when God will avenge his elect by smiting their enemies with the rod of his wrath. When Paul was challenged for making this statement about Ananias (v. 4), he responded, "I knew not, brethren, that he was God's high priest; for it is written, "You shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people" (v. 5; Exodus 22:28). No doubt, Paul knew that the Jews regarded Ananias as the high priest. He was not an ignorant man. But he also knew that the Jewish priesthood had degenerated into nothing but a pretentious show, that the typical priesthood of the Old Testament had been fulfilled and thus nullified by Christ, and that there is no high priest before God but Jesus Christ, the sinners' Substitute (Hebrews 7:24–25; 10:1–14; 1 John 2:1–2). Paul's words in verse 5 have a tone of sarcasm in them. It is as though he were saying, "Him, a high priest! If that man was God's high priest, I would not speak evil of him."

Then, the Apostle outwitted his enemies (verses 6–10). He knew the Pharisees and Sadducees were enemies. The Pharisees were self-righteous legalists; but they did believe the letter of the Scriptures and tenaciously defended the doctrines of immortality and the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees were liberals. The only time the two ever got together was to crucify Christ or persecute his people. Knowing their hatred of one another, Paul said, "I am a Pharisee," and got the two groups fighting one another. He made no compromise. In all points of doctrine wherein the Pharisees differed from the Sadducees, Paul was still a Pharisee. He hoped for and believed in the resurrection of the dead. Once the two groups started fighting, the chief captain sent his soldiers to bring Paul back into the castle, lest he be pulled into pieces by them.

Secondly, while we realize that the gospel of Christ offends men and stirs up their anger, we must never forget that THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IS ALWAYS FAITHFUL TO HIS OWN (v. 11). After two days of constant harassment, the Lord made himself known to his afflicted servant. Christ never leaves or forsakes his own (Matthew 28:20; Philippians 4:4; Hebrews 13:5). We are never alone; but we do not always sense our Lord's presence. So in our darkest hours he appears and makes us to know that he is with us (Daniel 3:35). Perhaps Paul had become despondent. Perhaps he feared he had made a mistake in ignoring the warnings of his friends about coming to Jerusalem (Acts 20:16; 21:13). Perhaps he feared he might never reach Rome. So, "The Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as you have testified of me in Jerusalem, so must you bear witness of me also at Rome" (Psalm 42:11; Isaiah 41:10; 43:1–5; 46:4).

Thirdly, read verses 12–35 and understand that OUR GOD WISELY AND SOVEREIGNLY RULES ALL THE EVENTS OF PROVIDENCE FOR GOOD. God rules all things absolutely for the eternal good of his elect and the accomplishment of his eternal purpose, for the glory of his own great name (Psalm 76:10; 115:3; 135:6; Romans 8:28–30; 11:36). It was the wrath of wicked men that carried Paul to Caesarea and ultimately to Rome. God took the evil conspiracy of a band of Jewish zealots (terrorists) and brought good out of it. Because they plotted to kill Paul, God moved a pagan Roman commander to send Paul on his way under the protection of 470 soldiers! When he arrived at Caesarea and was brought before Felix, the governor, Felix said, "I will hear you when your accusers are also come. And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's judgment hall" (v. 35).

Fourthly, it is important for us to observe the fact that THE SAINTS OF GOD IN THIS WORLD ARE A HARMLESS AND BLAMELESS PEOPLE (v. 29). The Jews sought every way imaginable to bring an accusation against Paul. But they found none. They hated him. They wanted to kill him. But he was a man of blameless reputation. His life adorned his doctrine. May the same be true of us (Titus 2:10; Philippians 2:14–16). If we faithfully confess Christ before men, we will meet with opposition, as Paul did. When men oppose us, the Lord will stand by us, as he stood by Paul. Let us confidently trust our heavenly Father's wise and good providence and seek, for the glory of his name, to live blamelessly before men.

67. "THE WAY WHICH THEY CALL HERESY"

Acts 24:1–27

Acts 23 closed with Paul at Caesarea under arrest in Herod's judgment hall. He had been brought there under cover of night and under the protection of 470 Roman soldiers by order of Claudius Lysias. Claudius Lysias wrote a letter to Felix, the Roman governor, explaining the unusual circumstances of Paul's case and the reason for his actions (Acts 23:25–30). When Paul arrived at Caesarea, Felix told him that he would hear his case once his accusers had arrived from Jerusalem. This historical narrative of what transpired at Caesarea is intended by the Holy Spirit to teach us specific spiritual truths which the wise will lay to heart.

First, the Jews' accusations against Paul show us that IT IS EASY, THOUGH BASE, WORK TO SLANDER AND FALSELY ACCUSE UPRIGHT, HONEST PEOPLE OF WICKED DEEDS AND SINISTER MOTIVES (verses 1–9). Paul was an upright, honest man. He had done nothing wrong, certainly nothing criminal. He had done nothing, except faithfully preach the gospel of Christ to lost religionists. For that he was arrested and treated as a common criminal (2 Timothy 1:8–9).

When his accusers arrived, (Ananias the high priest, a delegation of the Sanhedrin {"the elders"}, and a slick, polished lawyer named Tertullus), Paul was brought to trial before Felix. Tertullus began with flowery accolades designed to bias Felix's sentiment toward the Jews, knowing that proud men love the praises of men (Job 32:21–22; Psalm 12:2–3; Proverbs 26:28). The accusations against Paul were narrowed down to three.

1. "We have found this man a pestilent fellow." This charge was intended to identify Paul as a troublemaker, one who constantly stirred social unrest. Palestine was filled with such men, and the Governor would naturally be disposed against such.

2. "A mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes." Here Tertullus brings to Felix's attention the fact that Paul was connected with the followers of Jesus, the Nazarene. They were considered both by the Jews and the Romans to be a heretical sect. In those days, the preaching of the gospel met with such phenomenal success that both the political and ecclesiastical worlds feared ultimately being dominated by the church of God, though none of God's servants sought to influence the world by political power. Then as now, God's true people sought not moral, political, and social reform, but the conquest of men's hearts and lives by the power of the gospel (2 Corinthians 10:3–5).

3. "Who also has gone about to profane the temple." This indictment seems to be the most serious. Yet, it states no specific charge. It is not charged that Paul had profaned the temple, but that he went about to do so. In an attempt to implicate the chief captain, Lysias, and put their own case in a more favorable light, Tertullus said, "You would not have been bothered with this matter if Lysias had left us alone." Then he said, we are certain that your own examination of this man will prove our charges. And all the elders said, "Amen".

These charges were made against Paul by religious men who knew they were not true. Their hatred for God, the gospel of his grace, and the man who stood on the front lines, leading the church of God against the gates of Hell, allowed them to justify violating their own consciences, their own religious codes, and the law of God, all in the name of God and righteousness!

Second, when Paul stood to defend himself, he acknowledged one thing that must never be forgotten—TRUE RELIGION, THE GOSPEL OF GOD'S FREE, SOVEREIGN, SAVING GRACE IN JESUS CHRIST, IS ALWAYS REGARDED BY MAINSTREAM, HUMAN RELIGIOUS OPINION AS THE WAY OF HERESY (verses 10–21). Paul boldly declared to Felix, "This I confess unto you, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers!"

Paul's response was much more specific than Tertullus's general charges. After briefly addressing the bench, giving honor to whom honor is due, but without flattery, Paul said to his accusers, "Prove it!" He knew they had no basis for their charges. He had been away from Jerusalem for a long time (v. 17). He had returned simply to worship God, bringing alms and offerings from the Gentile churches to their Jewish brethren (v. 17; Acts 11:29–30; Romans 15:25; 2 Corinthians 8:4; Galatians 2:10). He came in a quiet, lawful manner. He made no disturbance. The real culprits were the troublemakers who followed him from Asia Minor and spread slanderous rumors about him (verses 18–19).

Mainstream religion has always been opposed to the gospel of God. The message of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone offends man's pride because it exposes his sin, his intelligence because it can only be known by revelation, his righteousness because it declares his righteousness to be filthy rags and reveals the necessity of a substitutionary atonement for sin and the imputed righteousness of an infinitely meritorious Representative, the Lord Jesus Christ. Though all the world, (academic, political, and religious), says otherwise, there is only one religion and one message that fully satisfies all that is written in the law and the prophets, honoring the justice and truth of God, while holding forth the hope of resurrection and eternal life to sinners who deserve the wrath of God. That message, the gospel of Christ, declares seven facts, seven spiritual truths, about which there can be no compromise, though all the world denounce them as heresy.

1. The Bible alone is the Word of God and as such must be our only rule of faith and practice (2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21; Isaiah 8:20).

2. God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is absolutely sovereign over all things and constantly exercises sovereignty in creation, providence, and grace (Psalm 115:3; 135:6; Romans 11:36).

3. All men and women by nature, since the fall of Adam are totally depraved, spiritually dead sinners (Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12; Ephesians 2:1–4).

4. By eternal, unconditional election, the Lord God chose a people before the world began, who must and shall be saved (Ephesians 1:3–6; 2 Thessalonians 2:13).

5. The Lord Jesus Christ effectually redeemed all God's elect, putting away their sins by the sacrifice of himself, and obtained eternal redemption for them (Isaiah 53:1–12; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13; Hebrews 9:12; 1 Peter 2:24).

6. The grace of God is irresistible in its application, always effecting the salvation of chosen, redeemed sinners at the time appointed (Psalm 65:4; 110:3).

7. Every true believer shall persevere in grace and faith, being kept by the power and grace of God unto eternal salvation (John 10:28; Philippians 1:6; 1 Peter 1:5).

Thirdly, Felix stands before us as a beacon to warn us that ALL WHO PUT OFF THE CLAIMS OF CHRIST TO "A MORE CONVENIENT SEASON" COURT DIVINE REPROBATION (verses 22–27). Paul spoke plainly to the Roman governor and his wife about "the faith of Christ," about "that Way", of which they had heard so much. He pressed home both the necessity of Christ's imputed righteousness and the moral implications of the gospel. Felix was obviously moved, but not humbled. Confronted with the claims of Christ, he postponed commitment to him to "a more convenient season". But "a more convenient season" never came. Today Felix is in Hell because, having heard the gospel, he refused the claims of Christ in the gospel. Let all who are wise be warned!

68. "THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD"

Acts 24:10–21

Throughout the Book of Acts, the apostles constantly emphasized the resurrection of Christ and the consequent resurrection of the dead by his power. When Matthias was chosen to replace the apostate Judas, Peter said, one must be "ordained to be a witness with us of the resurrection" (1:22). A primary function of an apostle was being a witness of the Lord's resurrection. On the day of Pentecost, the apostle showed the multitude how that David by the Spirit "spoke of the resurrection of Christ" (2:31). When Peter and John were arrested and brought before the council, the reason given for their arrest was that "they taught the people and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (4:2). When they were set free, we are told, "And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all" (4:33). It was the preaching of the resurrection that aroused the curiosity of the Athenians. They said, Paul seemed "to be setting forth strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection" (17:18). And when Paul answered the Jewish council which accused him before Felix, he said, I "have hope toward God … that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust" (24:15).

The resurrection of the dead is a blessed gospel doctrine believed by and full of comfort for all God's saints. We believe, according to the Word of God, that every person who ever lived shall live forever, not only in the immortality of his soul, but also that his body shall be raised from the dead in the last day. The very flesh in which you now live shall be raised to life again and you shall live forever, either in the bliss of Heaven, in the presence of God, the holy angels, and "just men made perfect," or in torments of Hell, in the company of Satan, demons, and ungodly sinners, enduring the fires of the wrath of God which cannot be quenched!

THERE SHALL BE A RESURRECTION OF THE JUST. The light of nature tells all men that the soul is immortal. Even the heathen acknowledge that the soul of man is something so wonderful and mysterious that it must endure forever. Both pagan religion and pagan philosophy acknowledge the immortality of the soul. But the resurrection of the body is another matter. This is not something that can be discovered and proved by science and philosophy. It is something that can be known only by divine revelation and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. When the Word of God speaks of the resurrection of the just, it is referring to the resurrection of those people who have been justified and made righteous by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to them. When Christ comes again, all who trust him, all who have been redeemed by his blood and saved by his grace, shall be raised to immortal life and eternal joy.

The saints of God in all ages have lived in hope of the resurrection. The faith of God's elect regarding the resurrection has been a matter of constant, unwavering confidence from the beginning. Job, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Hannah, David, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel all spoke of it with confidence and joy (Job 14:12, 14, 15; 19:25–27; Hebrews 11:19, 22; Deuteronomy 32:39; 1 Samuel 2:6; Psalm 16:8–11; 17:15; Isaiah 26:19; Ezekiel 37:11–14; Daniel 12:2). In the New Testament, references to the resurrection are so numerous that they simply cannot be listed in the space of this study. But two passages from the lips of our Savior will suffice to declare his doctrine. Read John 5:25–29 and 11:23–26. The first resurrection, spoken of in John 5:25 and Revelation 20:6, is a spiritual resurrection. It is the new birth, regeneration, the resurrection of chosen, redeemed sinners from spiritual death to spiritual life by the irresistible power and grace of God the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:1–4). But there shall also be the literal resurrection of the body at Christ's second coming (John 5:28–29; 11:23–26). The translations of Enoch and Elijah stand as pledges of every believer's resurrection (Genesis 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11). As those two men were translated from earth to Heaven, so all believers living on the earth when Christ comes again shall be taken up to glory, but only after the dead in Christ have been raised (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18). The angels of God watching over the bodies of God's saints also assure us of the resurrection (Jude 9). Though our bodies must sleep for a while beneath the sod, God's angels watch over them to protect them until the trumpet of God shall sound. The many resurrections of the dead recorded in the Scriptures are visible, documented assurances of the resurrection to come. Our God has given us proof over and over again that he is able to raise the dead to life again (1 Kings 17:21; 2 Kings 13:21; Matthew 27:50–54; Luke 7:14; 8:54–55; John 11:43–44; Acts 9:40; 20:9).

Our bodies as well as our souls belong to Christ and must be with him in glory (1 Corinthians 6:13). Christ does not save the souls of his elect alone, but their bodies too. His work of redemption will not be complete until he has raised the bodies of all for whom he made atonement at Calvary (Romans 8:23; Ephesians 1:14). The body is for the Lord; and he shall have it. "Your bodies are the members of Christ" (1 Corinthians 6:15). Not only are our souls vitally joined to him, but our bodies as well (Ephesians 5:30–32). The believer's body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). The fact that the Holy Spirit dwells in the body of a saint not only sanctifies it, but also renders it immortal. Though this temple must go to the dust, it shall be rebuilt in "the resurrection of the just!"

Above all else, our hope of the resurrection is built upon the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, arose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:1–23, 49). If Christ arose from the dead as our Head and Representative, then all his people must also be raised. And if there is no resurrection, then Christ did not arise and we are yet in our sins. If there is no resurrection, then there is … no atonement for sin, for justice is not satisfied … no righteousness to impute to us … no acceptance with God … and no salvation! But since Christ did die for us and did rise from the dead, we are assured that … our sins which were imputed to him are gone, washed away by his blood. Justice is satisfied!… His righteousness is of infinite merit for all who trust him … And all his people, all who are one with him, must be raised from the dead. Christ is the first fruit of the resurrection; but the first fruit is the pledge of more to come. There shall be a resurrection of the just. This is the faith of the gospel. If you do not believe it, you have not been taught of God.

THERE SHALL ALSO BE A RESURRECTION OF THE UNJUST. At the Lord's second coming, both the righteous and the wicked, the believing and the unbelieving, the living and the dead, the sheep and the goats shall be raised. Those who stand before God in the spotless garments of Christ's imputed righteousness, whose sins have been put away by his substitutionary sacrifice will enter into and forever enjoy the glory of heavenly bliss in their bodies. But all who stand before God naked, polluted in their sins, without a Substitute will be cast body and soul into Hell to eternally endure the torments of God's holy and just wrath. This is the second death. By some means, known only to himself, the Lord God will sustain the bodies and souls of the damned eternally, so that, though his unmitigated wrath is poured out upon them, they will not die (Matthew 5:27–30; 10:28). Realizing these things, Paul wrote, "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Corinthians 5:11). There will be a resurrection of the dead, both the righteous and the wicked. You shall be damned forever, body and soul, if you are not washed in the blood of Christ and robed in his righteousness. I urge you therefore, if you are yet without Christ, even as you read these lines, to be reconciled to God. Trust his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and live forever.

"You sinners, seek His grace, whose wrath you cannot bear;

Fly to the shelter of His cross, and find salvation there!" LET ALL WHO ARE WISE LIVE CONSTANTLY IN THE IMMEDIATE PROSPECT OF DEATH, THE RESURRECTION, JUDGMENT, AND ETERNITY (Mark 8:35–37; 2 Corinthians 4:18–5:21).

69. DEADLY PROCRASTINATION

Acts 24:22–27

The closing verses of Acts 24 stand as a beacon to warn us of the evil and danger of procrastination. "After certain days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, which was a Jewess, he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith of Christ. And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go your way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for you." But he never did. For two years, "Felix, willing to show the Jews a pleasure, left Paul bound." Sometime later, this same Felix committed suicide. Felix warns us all that anyone who trifles with the things of God courts eternal damnation. Procrastination is always evil; but procrastination regarding the claims of Christ in the gospel is deadly. If a person will not repent when he is confronted with the claims of Christ, delivered to him by the power of the Holy Spirit, he cannot repent later. Such procrastination is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31; Proverbs 1:23–33).

PAUL REASONED WITH FELIX CONCERNING THE FAITH OF CHRIST. Felix was a notoriously wicked man. He rose from slavery to be the Roman governor of Judea by cunning and treachery. His wife, Drusilla, was of the same character. Having the power of Rome behind him, Felix could do whatever he desired with Paul: kill him, leave him in prison, or set him free. Paul was fully aware of these things. Felix called Paul before him because he was curious about "the faith in Christ." He imagined that Paul's philosophical and religious opinions might be stimulating and entertaining. He certainly did not expect his prisoner to expose his sin and demand that he repent. But that is exactly what happened. God's faithful servant, being full of the Holy Spirit, powerfully preached the gospel of Christ to his captor. Without question, Paul boldly exposed Felix's sin, both the corruption of his heart and the evil of his deeds. But do not imagine that the apostle spent his time lecturing this pagan governor about the immorality of his behavior and tried to persuade him to become a morally reformed man. Paul was aiming at the governor's heart. His subject was not morality, but "the faith in Christ." He was endeavoring to persuade this proud, wicked man to bow before the throne of God in repentance and faith, "the faith in Christ." His sermon had three points.

First, Paul reasoned with Felix about righteousness. No one will ever be saved until he is made to see what the Word of God teaches about righteousness. When the Spirit of God deals with sinners in grace, he reproves them of righteousness (John 16:8). In essence, Paul said, Felix, God is holy, righteous, just, and true. Because he is holy, he requires you to be perfectly holy. Else he will consume you in his wrath. You know that you are a sinful man before the holy Lord God, you have no righteousness; and, being a sinful man, you cannot produce righteousness. That is why the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God came into this world. He came to establish righteousness before God as a man, to make sinners righteous by his obedience to God as a man and his satisfaction of divine justice by his death as the sinner's Substitute. He is "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS". Felix, the only way sinners like you and I can ever be made righteous is by the doing and dying of Jesus Christ, the sinner's Substitute. Trust him. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. If you do but trust him, he is your righteousness. Your faith in him is evidence of the fact that he put away your sins by the shedding of his blood, that God has imputed to you his righteousness, and you are born of God. This is what the Word of God teaches about righteousness. Be certain that you understand these things: (1) The Lord God is perfectly righteous and holy (Psalm 7:9–11; Daniel 9:14). (2) The holy Lord God demands perfect righteousness in all his moral creatures, in all who are accepted by him (Leviticus 11:44–45; 22:21; Matthew 5:20; Hebrews 12:14). (3) No man is capable of producing righteousness before God (Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:9–20). (4) The only way a sinner can obtain righteousness before God is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 3:19–26; 10:1–4).

Second, Paul reasoned with Felix about temperance. The word "temperance" means "self-control". It is yielding to Christ the rule of one's life. That is the essence of faith (Mark 8:34–36; Luke 14:26–33). It is ever the tendency of sinful man to abuse the powers God has bestowed upon him, to allow the passions of his flesh to rule his life, and to give in to the persuasive allurements of the world and of Satan. But when a person is born of God, the Holy Spirit graciously subdues him, brings him under the rule of Christ and of righteousness, so that he as a king rules over his life and the affairs of it, living in obedience to the will of God, for the glory of God (Galatians 5:23; Romans 6:11–18; Rev. 1:6). As the believer grows in the grace and knowledge of Christ, he grows in the exercise of temperance (2 Peter 1:6). Yet, this temperance is something that requires watchfulness and diligence (1 Corinthians 9:27). Felix was a proud and powerful man. Paul told him that the only way he could ever obtain righteousness with God and eternal salvation was to bow to Christ as a needy sinner, submitting to his dominion and trusting the merits of his obedience as Lord and Savior. Then he pressed the claims of Christ home.

Third, Paul warned Felix and reasoned with him concerning eternity and judgment to come. He pressed the governor to make a decision. I suspect he said something like this—"Felix, I have reasoned with you from the Word of God. I have told you the truth. You know that I have done so. Here are your options. You must either repent or perish. You must either turn or burn. You must either trust Christ and be saved by him, or you must meet him in judgment and be damned by him. Which will it be?" Knowing the terror of the Lord, Paul pressed and persuaded Felix, urging him to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10–11).

WHEN HE HEARD THE GOSPEL, FELIX TREMBLED WITH CONVICTION. I know that the grace and power of God the Holy Spirit is effectual and irresistible. If God the Holy Spirit goes after a sinner, he always fetches him home (Psalm 65:4). But I also know that every one is responsible to believe the gospel and that every sinner who obeys the gospel is saved by Christ (Proverbs 1:23–33; Romans 10:21; John 3:36). If at this point Felix had repented and trusted Christ he would have been saved, but he chose not to do so. His conviction passed. He chose death rather than life, because he refused to give himself up to the rule and dominion of Christ. Conviction is not conversion. Emotion is not salvation. Trembling is not believing. But why did Felix tremble at the message Paul preached? He trembled because he was convinced of all that Paul said; but he was still a rebel at heart. His heart was not broken. His will was not subdued. He would not bow to the rule of Christ as his Lord.

BECAUSE OF HIS HEART'S REBELLION AGAINST THE SOVEREIGN CHRIST, FELIX WILLFULLY REJECTED THE CLAIMS OF CHRIST IN THE GOSPEL. He said to Paul, "Go your way for this time; when I have a more convenient season, I will call for you." He said, "Not today. Perhaps tomorrow. I have some things to take care of first. I will call you tomorrow." But tomorrow never came. God never promised to save anyone tomorrow (2 Corinthians 6:1–2; Hebrews 3:15; Psalm 95:6–8).

FELIX WAS DAMNED BY HIS PROCRASTINATION! He could have been saved; but he stopped his ears. He willfully rejected the counsel of God, and God never spoke to him again. What a warning Felix is to all who would trifle with the things of God! There is such a thing as judicial reprobation. There are people living upon the earth who are as sure for Hell as if they were already there. There is no hope for them. God will not show them mercy. Though still alive, like Felix, they are damned forever (Jeremiah 7:15–16; Hosea 4:17; Romans 11:20–21). Many were still alive in Noah's day when God shut the door of the ark. The five foolish virgins were still alive when God shut them out of his kingdom. Esau was still alive when he tried to repent, but found no place of repentance. Whenever God speaks and those who hear his voice refuse to immediately obey it, they are courting reprobation (2 Corinthians 2:14–16). If a sinner does not respond to the call of God in the gospel, the day will come when he will want to respond but will not be able to do so. Once more, I direct your attention to God's warning in Proverbs 1:23–33. Read it and be warned. Felix stands as a beacon to warn sinners of the danger of procrastination.

70. JESUS AFFIRMED TO BE ALIVE

Acts 25:1–27

The Jews were not at all happy about the way Felix had handled Paul. So, shortly after Festus took the governor's seat at Caesarea, they tried to get him to bring Paul to Jerusalem for trial, or so they intimated. Actually, they intended to assassinate him along the way. Read verses 1–12. The respected religious leaders of the day were so savage in their hatred toward Paul, the gospel he preached, and the God he represented that in the name of God they were determined to murder him (John 16:2). But Paul, being a Roman citizen, took advantage of his legal rights. Refusing to be tried by a lower court at Jerusalem, he said, "I appeal to Caesar" (v. 11). Festus had no choice under Roman law. He said, "Unto Caesar shall you go" (v. 12).

Now read verses 13–27. When Agrippa, who was reputed to be a specialist in Jewish matters, came to Caesarea, Festus welcomed the opportunity to discuss Paul's case with him. Agrippa expressed a desire to hear Paul for himself. Arrangements were made. Agrippa and his sister, Bernice, came to "the place of hearing" in great pomp. And Festus displayed the customary flattery and false adulation of one politician to another (verses 22–27). The fact of the matter was that Festus was fearful of sending Paul to Rome with no legitimate charges against him (verses 19, 27). By involving Agrippa in the matter he had something to fall back on, were his actions questioned by his superiors at Rome.

TWO THINGS WERE APPARENT TO FESTUS. Remember, he was a pagan politician. He had no regard for Paul or the Jews. He did not even know what the controversy was about. Yet, he quickly perceived two things that distinguished Paul from his enemies.

First, the Jews, the religious skeptics, the unbelieving religionists, raised "certain questions"; but Paul made bold affirmations (verses 18–19). That is ever the case. Those who oppose the gospel and take offense at the preaching of the cross of Christ assert nothing, but question everything. Where they cannot prove evil, they hope to cast a shadow of doubt by raising questions. In doctrinal matters, their questions are almost always foolish carpings about meaningless things. It is pointless and futile to answer such. We are repeatedly warned not to do so (1 Timothy 1:4; 6:4; 2 Timothy 2:23; Titus 3:9). We do not need to defend the truth, but simply declare it. That was Paul's method. He boldly, dogmatically affirmed the truth as God revealed it.

Believing men and women are God's witnesses (Isaiah 44:8; Acts 1:8). A witness is one who simply tells what he knows. He cares nothing for the questions, speculations, and objections of others. Even so, we simply affirm certain, definite, revealed facts, facts plainly laid down in the Word of God and experienced in our own hearts. Here we stand, oblivious to the science, wisdom, and reason of educated fools. The basis of our faith is the Word of God alone (Isaiah 8:20; 2 Timothy 3:16). The Jews were full of questions. But Paul affirmed that Jesus, who was dead, is alive. He made no attempt to answer their questions or prove his doctrine. He simply affirmed that it was so upon the basis of Holy Scripture and his own experience. He had seen, spoken to, heard from, and felt the power of the risen, exalted, living Christ. He affirmed what he knew to be the truth. That is what we must do as God's witnesses in this world today.

Secondly, Festus observed that the Jews were concerned about their own religion (superstition); but Paul was concerned with a living Person (v. 19). Paul's religion was not a religion of books and creeds. His religion was a Person. He found all his treasure in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He knew, trusted, loved, worshiped, served, walked with, and preached a Person. Christ is more than the Author and Finisher of our faith. He is the Sum and Substance of it. We glory not in our creed or denomination, but in the Lord Jesus Christ himself (1 Corinthians 1:30–31;

Galatians 6:14; Philippians 3:3). Christianity is a living union with a living Person. It is Christ in you and you in Christ.

PREACHING, ACCORDING TO THE PATTERN AND PRECEPT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, IS THE DECLARATION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. The thing that so greatly disturbed the Jews was not that Paul did any of the things they accused him of doing. They knew he was innocent of their charges. But he went everywhere preaching that Christ, whom they had crucified, is alive. This was such an obvious thing that Fetus himself declared it (v. 19). Paul spoke so much of the risen, exalted, reigning, saving Christ that even this pagan magistrate knew that his message was "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). In those early days of Christianity, God's preachers, as often as they could get an ear to bend, preached Christ to men. Indeed, to this day, God's preachers go everywhere preaching the Lord Jesus Christ. Any sermon that is not full of Christ, does not point sinners to Christ, and cause men to think upon him, that does not send men away with Christ on their minds ought never to have been preached (1 Corinthians 2:2; 9:16). A Christless sermon is a useless sermon! "Jesus Christ and him crucified" is the message of Holy Scripture (Luke 24:27, 44, 45). The only hope of perishing sinners (John 12:32), and the believer's motive, inspiration, and guide in all things (2 Corinthians 8:9; 1 Peter 2:21–24).

Paul laid great stress upon and particularly emphasized Christ's death upon the cross as the sinner's Substitute. He preached, as Festus said, "one Jesus, which was dead." That which was thought to be the most obnoxious, offensive, and ridiculous point of his theology was the very thing which Paul preached most (1 Corinthians 1:17–23). That which the Jews most despised and the Gentiles most ridiculed, Paul most constantly affirmed (Galatians 6:14). He preached life by Christ's death, salvation by the crucified Substitute, blood atonement and justification by the penal death of Christ in the place of God's elect as their all-sufficient and effectual Redeemer (Romans 3:24–26). Because of his faithful, dogmatism in preaching Christ to men, Paul was hounded to death by lost religious men who, being ignorant of God's righteousness in Christ, went about to establish their own righteousness (Acts 24:5; Romans 10:1–4). And you may be assured of this fact—That man who faithfully preaches the gospel of Christ as Paul did, and the congregation which hears and follows him, will have to bear the scandalous reproach and bitter wrath of lost religious people today. The offence of the cross has not ceased (Galatians 5:11).

In preaching the gospel, Paul affirmed that Jesus Christ who died at Calvary, is alive! He had seen the risen Savior, heard his voice, and experienced the transforming power of his grace. Every believer has affirmed this fact in his own soul. Jesus is alive! He lives to claim Heaven for his redeemed ones (Psalm 68:18–19), to bestow his Spirit upon God's elect in regenerating grace (Zechariah 12:9–10; Galatians 3:13–14), to prepare Heaven for the homecoming of his saints (John 14:1–3), to make intercession for his people (Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1–2), to rule all things on behalf of chosen, redeemed sinners (John 17:2), and to come again in power and great glory to consummate his great work of saving his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18).

71. THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST—AN AFFIRMED FACT

Acts 25:19

Festus summed up the dispute between the Apostle Paul and his Jewish accusers in one issue. The whole controversy was "about one Jesus, which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive." The object of this study is just that—To affirm that Christ Jesus is alive.

The incarnation of Christ is a source of great comfort and joy to every believer. How blessed it is for us to know that God assumed our nature! God in human flesh is able to redeem us, understands and sympathizes with us, and is touched with the feeling of our infirmities (Matthew 1:21, 23; Hebrews 2:17–18; 4:15). The righteous life of Christ as a man is the righteousness he wrought out for his people. His life of obedience is a moral example of faith, love, holiness, and devotion which every believer strives to follow (John 13:15; Ephesians 4:32–5:1; 1 Peter 2:21). But it is much more than a moral example! Christ's righteous obedience to God as our Representative and Substitute is that "holiness without which no man shall see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). His righteous obedience is the robe of pure white, the garment of salvation in which every believer is clothed. It is the righteousness performed by Christ which God imputes to his elect in justification, by which we are made righteous, perfectly holy, and accepted with the holy Lord God (Jeremiah 23:6; Romans 5:18–21; 10:1–4; 2 Corinthians 5:21). The blood of Christ is our redemption. His death as our vicarious, sin-atoning, substitutionary sacrifice is the basis of our hope before God. He paid our debt, satisfied divine justice, and put away the sins of God's elect. He obtained eternal redemption for us! "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law" (Galatians 3:13). He did not try to redeem us. He redeemed us! He died. Therefore, we shall never die (Romans 3:24–26; Romans 8:1, 33–39; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 9:12; 1 Peter 1:18–20; 2:24; 3:18). We rejoice in and give thanks to God for the accomplishments of our dear Savior. He came into the world as a man for us. He lived in righteousness for us. He died on the cursed tree for us. But had he not risen from the grave, ascended into Heaven, and sat down on the right hand of the majesty on high, his obedience, life, and death would have been as meaningless and useless to us as that of any other man. The fact is, the whole truth of God, the whole gospel, the whole of our faith, the whole of our salvation, and the whole glory of the triune God stands or falls with the resurrection of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:14–18). Therefore, it is needful that the fact of it be established clearly in every believer's heart and mind.

THE FACT STATED—The Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, died upon a Roman cross 2000 years ago. He died at the hands of wicked men by the will of God as a Substitute for sinners (Isaiah 53:9–12; Acts 2:23). Having died, he was taken down from the cross, wrapped in grave clothes, and buried in a borrowed tomb. That tomb was covered with a large rock, sealed by the Roman government, and guarded by two experienced soldiers (Matthew 27:57–66). But on the morning of the third day, he arose from the dead. Christ really did die upon the cross. When the soldiers came to break his legs, to finish him off, they realized that he was already dead and did not bother. Yet, with malicious spite, one of them shoved a spear through Immanuel's heart (John 19:31–37). That very same Jesus who died arose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:3–4; Romans 14:9). Yes, our Lord's resurrection was a literal, physical, bodily resurrection. It was not the resurrection of his divine nature. His divine nature could not and did not die! It was not the resurrection of his human soul. The soul of man is immortal! His soul, like every believer's, departed immediately to Paradise upon the death of his body (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:1–9). It was his physical body that was raised from the dead (John 2:19–21; Luke 24:39–40; John 20:25, 27). Though now immortal and glorified, our Lord's human body in Heaven is the same in appearance, size, form, and substance as it was when he walked upon the earth. He is a real man, even today!

THE FACT AFFIRMED—The fact of our Lord's resurrection is so clearly and undeniably affirmed that it cannot be denied by any honest person. Those who are determined, in their obstinate rebellion against God, may suppress the truth and loudly denounce it; but they know in their hearts that it is so, even as the heathen know in their hearts that the wrath of God is upon them (Romans 1:18). But the clear affirmations of Christ's resurrection are given for the comfort and edification of God's saints. First, the Old Testament prophets declared that Messiah would be one who would arise from the dead (Isaiah 53:10–12). It was clearly revealed in the Old Testament that Christ would both die to redeem and arise to rule over all things to save his elect. Compare Scripture with Scripture and you will see how that the New Testament is the fulfillment and explanation of the Old (Psalm 2:7 & Hebrews 1:5; Psalm 16:10 & Acts 2:31; Psalm 68:18 & Ephesians 4:18; Psalm 110:1 & Hebrews 1:13; Psalm 110:4 & Hebrews 7:17; Isaiah 26:19 & Matthew 27:52–53; Hosea 6:2 & Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1). Second, in addition to the many direct prophecies, there were many types and pictures of our Lord's resurrection in the Old Testament: (1) Adam awakening out of a deep sleep to behold and receive the bride formed from his side (Genesis 2:21–23); (2) Isaac's resurrection from the sacrificial altar three days after the sentence of death was passed upon him (Genesis 22; Hebrews 11:17–19); (3) The bush that was burned with fire but was not consumed, out of which God spoke to Moses (Exodus 3:2–6); (4) Aaron's rod that budded and blossomed with life (Numbers 17:5–9); (5) The living bird that was set free after it was dipped in the blood of the bird that was slain for the purification of the leper (Leviticus 14:6); (6) The scapegoat that was set free after the other goat was slain for atonement (Leviticus 16:8–10, 15–17, 20–22); (7) The deliverance of Jonah from the belly of the whale after three days (Matthew 12:40).

Third, the witnesses of our Lord's resurrection are of such number and credibility that no court in the world could deny their testimony. He was seen of angels (Matthew 28:2, 5, 6; Luke 24:5–6; John 20:12). Holy women saw the risen Christ and declared it (Matthew 28:9; Mark 16:4; Luke 24:2–3). The soldiers who guarded the tomb themselves testified of the resurrection (

Matthew 28:4, 11–15). More than 500 disciples saw the risen Christ at one time (1 Corinthians 15:6). The risen Savior was seen by Peter, then by the rest of the apostles, and last of all by Paul, both before and after he was converted (1 Corinthians 15:5–8; Acts 22:17–18; 26:16, 19). These men were witnesses chosen of God for the purpose of declaring the resurrection to men (Acts 10:34–43). All who reject their testimony willfully shut their eyes to the most well attested fact in history.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit is himself the witness of Christ's resurrection (Acts 5:30–32; Hebrews 2:4). God the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost and wrought miracles in the apostolic age as a confirmation of the fact that Christ, having accomplished the redemption of his people, is risen and exalted.

THE FACT EXPLAINED—The fact of our Lord's resurrection is vital. Without it, there is no salvation for any sinner. But since Christ is risen from the dead, exalted to the throne of God, and makes intercession for his people, three things are guaranteed by it. (1) The Redemption of God's Elect—Justice being satisfied, our sins have been purged from the record of Heaven, and sin can never be imputed to a believer (Hebrews 9:12; Romans 4:8; 1 John 2:2). (2) The Regeneration of God's Elect—(Ephesians 2:5–6; 1 Peter 1:3). All for whom atonement was made and who were raised with Christ representatively shall be raised by his Spirit from death to life in the new birth. (3) The Resurrection of God's Elect—(1 Corinthians 15:20, 23; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18). Every believer, every chosen, redeemed, regenerate soul, shall be completely conformed to the image of Christ, body, soul, and spirit in resurrection glory (Romans 8:28–30).

72. PAUL'S TESTIMONY BEFORE AGRIPPA

Acts 26:1–32

Though Paul stood before a Roman tribunal in defense of his life, he seized the opportunity to tell both the court and his accusers what God had done for him and in him by his free and sovereign grace in Christ. In the thirty-two verses of this chapter, he describes himself, his life, his conversion, and his ministry. In doing so, he faithfully fulfilled his responsibility as Jehovah's servant (Isaiah 44:8; Acts 1:8), preaching Jesus Christ and him crucified even to his captors. The preaching of the gospel always calls for sinners to become followers of Christ, trusting him as Lord and Savior. Agrippa understood that from Paul's words and said, after Paul had finished speaking, "Almost you persuade me to be a Christian." What did Paul tell Agrippa that so moved him?

First, THE APOSTLE TOLD AGRIPPA THAT HE HAD BEEN A LOST RELIGIOUS ZEALOT (verses 1–11). He said, "After the most strictest sect of our religion, I lived a Pharisee" (v. 5). Saul of Tarsus never was a profligate, immoral person. He was from his youth an upright, religious man, a man of principle and integrity. Like the rich young ruler, he kept the law from his youth up. In so far as the letter of the law and its outward requirements were concerned, he was blameless (Philippians 3:4–6). Yet, he was lost! Unlike most religious people, Saul was a very zealous man. He was devoted. He studied the Scriptures with diligence. He talked about the things of God with zeal. He was wholehearted, earnest, and thoroughly committed. Saul of Tarsus never neglected the hour of prayer, the study of God's Word, or the house of God. So zealous was he in religion that, in accordance with Old Testament law, he persecuted those who followed Jesus of Nazareth relentlessly, believing them to be blasphemers. Saul was so zealous that most who truly worship God must blush with shame, when comparing themselves to him. Yet, he was lost! Moreover, Saul of Tarsus was thoroughly orthodox in his doctrine. This man was no scoffer, skeptic, or liberal. And he certainly was not an Arminian! Even before he was converted, he knew and embraced doctrinal truth (verses 4–8). I do not mean to suggest that he had spiritual understanding. But his doctrine was basically orthodox. Saul was a Pharisee. He believed in divine election, divine sovereignty, absolute predestination, total depravity, the inspiration of Scripture, the resurrection of the dead, and even particular redemption. No Pharisee, or anyone else who understands the Old Testament sacrifices, ever dreamed of a universal atonement! Saul even looked for the Christ, believing all the Old Testament prophecies relating to him. His doctrine was right. Yet, he was lost! Saul believed in Christ as a matter of doctrine, but he did not know Christ. He believed all that the Bible said about Christ; but he did not know him (John 17:3). He was a lost religious zealot.

Secondly, AT GOD'S APPOINTED TIME, SAUL OF TARSUS WAS CONFRONTED, CONQUERED, AND CONVERTED BY THE GRACE AND POWER OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST (verses 12–15). There is a time of love appointed by God for the saving of each of his elect (Ezekiel 16:8; Psalm 65:4; 110:3; Galatians 4:4–6). For Saul, the appointed time and place of mercy was when he was on his way to Damascus to persecute the saints of God there. Suddenly, the Son of God stepped into his life. He was not seeking the Lord; but the Lord sought him. He was not looking for grace; but grace looked for him. He did not find the Savior; but the Savior found him (Isaiah 65:1; Acts 9:1–20; 22:6–21).

He was "in the way". Though he did not know it, Saul was in the way that would lead him to Christ, following a prearranged path, walking in a preordained way. Each of his steps were ordered by the Lord, predestined and marked out before the world began (Proverbs 16:9; Romans 8:28).

Saul of Tarsus was an object of God's electing love. There were many traveling the Damascus road that day; but only one was called by God's effectual power and grace because only one had been chosen and redeemed. The irresistible grace and call came only to the chosen (Romans 8:29–30; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14).

The proud Pharisee was conquered and subdued by the revelation of Christ. The Lord Jesus met him in the way, revealed himself in him, and called him with a call he could not resist. He saw the Lord (v. 13), heard his voice (v. 14), and surrendered to his will (v. 15). All who are saved by God's grace are saved by the same sovereign intervention of God into their lives (Ephesians 2:1–6; Galatians 1:15–16).

Thirdly, THE LORD JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF PUT PAUL INTO THE MINISTRY (verses 16–18). God's preachers do not decide to go into the ministry and begin looking for a place to preach. Any man who goes looking for a place to preach will compromise to get it and compromise to keep it. God's preachers are made by God and put into the work of the ministry by him. Paul said, "I was made a minister" (Ephesians 3:7–11). God's preachers are sent by God with a message to proclaim to men. As it was with Paul, so it is with all who are called of God to preach the gospel. Their message and their method is determined by God. Paul was required to preach what he had experienced, no more and no less (v. 16). It was his privilege and responsibility to carry the light of the gospel into a world of darkness and superstition (v. 18). The message he was sent to preach was clear and simple (v. 18).

The Lord Jesus sent Paul to preach to sinners the forgiveness of sin by his blood (Ephesians 1:6), the hope of eternal life by his grace (2 Thessalonians 2:16), and sanctification (holiness) by faith in him (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Fourthly, PAUL WAS OBEDIENT TO HIS MASTER (verses 19–23). Wherever he went, he preached the gospel to all, Jews and Gentiles. His message was always the same (1 Corinthians 2:2). He constantly preached repentance toward God (v. 20), redemption by Christ (v. 23), and the resurrection of the dead (v. 23). He preached the first resurrection, which is spiritual regeneration by the power and grace of God the Holy Spirit (John 3:3–8; 5:25; Rev. 20:6), and the resurrection of the body at the last day (John 5:28; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18).

Fifthly, BEING CALLED OF GOD, PAUL WAS FAR MORE CONCERNED ABOUT THE SOULS OF MEN AND THE GLORY OF GOD THAN HE WAS HIS OWN COMFORT AND WELFARE (verses 24–32). He stands as a prisoner in chains before Festus and Agrippa. Yet, he is not seeking freedom, or even to prove his innocence. Paul's obvious intent in this defense of himself was to make Christ known to his captors. Read the chapter carefully. Throughout these verses, Paul was pointing Festus, Felix, Bernice, and his accusers to Christ as the Hope of Israel (v. 6), the crucified Savior (v. 9), the Light from Heaven (v. 13), the exalted Lord (verses 13–15), the Head of the Church (v. 14), and the sovereign God (verses 16–23). He told them that forgiveness, eternal life, repentance, redemption, sanctification, resurrection, and faith are all the gifts of God's free, saving grace in Christ. Festus considered him nothing but a madman (verses 24–25). But Paul (verses 26–32), sensing that he had gotten Agrippa's attention, pressed the claims of Christ upon him personally and urgently. Agrippa was according to his own words, "almost persuaded" to become a worshiper and follower of Christ—"Almost persuaded", but lost at last! Being reproved and instructed, Agrippa deliberately hardened his heart. Therefore, he perished. All who follow his example should tremble with fear (Proverbs 29:1).

73. "FOR THIS PURPOSE"

Acts 26:13–20

SALVATION IS NOT DETERMINED BY WHAT MAN DOES FOR GOD, BUT BY WHAT GOD DOES FOR MAN! "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jeremiah 2:9). In order for a sinner to be saved, three things are essential. If the one who reads these lines is saved, it is because God has done three things for you that you would not and could not do for yourself, three things which he has not done for any who perish under his wrath. God almighty has chosen you, redeemed you, and saved you! Otherwise, you could not and would not be saved.

Salvation begins with divine election (Psalm 65:4; Romans 8:28–30); 11:5–8; Ephesians 1:3–6; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). No sinner could ever have been saved apart from God's sovereign, eternal, electing love. Pardon is not the decision of the criminal, but the prerogative of the judge. Salvation comes to sinners in time according to the purpose of God in election from eternity (

2 Timothy 1:9; John 15:16). But election alone could save no one. Justice had to be satisfied. The second thing essential to salvation is redemption by the blood of Christ. Justice would never allow sin to be put away without satisfaction (Romans 3:24–26; Hebrews 9:22). And justice can never allow one sinner to suffer the wrath of God for whom atonement has been made (Romans 5:11; Galatians 3:13; Hebrews 9:12; 10:10–14). Christ laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:11, 15). He died in the place of his people (Isaiah 53:8). He made atonement for God's elect, the people he came to save and for whom he makes intercession (Matthew 1:21; John 17:9, 20). Election and redemption are essential to salvation, but something else is essential. "You must be born again!" In order for a sinner to see and enter into the kingdom of God, he must be regenerated, born again, by the irresistible power and grace of God the Holy Spirit (John 3:3–7). Election opens the door of mercy. Redemption removes the obstacle of grace, sin. And regeneration gives life to the dead. Regeneration, the new birth, is a resurrection from the dead. It is the creation of life. All who have been chosen by God the Father from eternity and redeemed by God the Son at Calvary, shall be regenerated and called by God the Holy Spirit at the appointed time of love (Psalm 65:4; 110:3). The fruit and result of regeneration is repentance, faith, and conversion. Sinners are not born again because they repent, believe, and turn to God. Rather, we repent, trust Christ, and are converted because we have been born of God. If, as the Scriptures universally declare, man is spiritually dead, salvation must be the result of what God alone does and in no way conditioned upon what the sinner does (Ephesians 2:1–8; Romans 9:16–18).

All whom the Father chose, the Son redeemed, and the Spirit calls must be saved. Yet, God always accomplishes his purpose of grace through the use of specific means. God speaks to men through men. Sovereign grace always operates through the use of human instrumentality. In Acts 26:13–20, Paul tells Agrippa how and why the Lord appeared to him and made him a preacher of the gospel. The Lord said to Paul, "I have appeared unto you for this purpose," for the purpose of saving chosen, redeemed sinners.

IN ORDER TO SAVE HIS ELECT, GOD PREPARES CHOSEN MEN TO PREACH THE GOSPEL (verses 13–17; Romans 10:14–15). Salvation is not a haphazard affair. It is accomplished by the all-wise plan and eternal purpose of God. One part of that plan and purpose is the preparation of preachers by whom he will call his elect. This is a wonderful thing! God calls, prepares, equips, and commissions specific men to preach the gospel to specific sinners in specific circumstances (Jeremiah 3:15), just as he prepared Paul to preach to the Gentiles! This business of making a preacher is God's work alone (Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 3:7–11; 4:8–16).

In verse 18, the apostle declares that GOD GRACIOUSLY SAVES SINNERS THROUGH THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL. God has not sent his servants into the world for nothing. "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Corinthians 1:23). "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God" (Romans 10:17). The gospel ministry must never be viewed as a light thing. The preaching of the gospel must ever be a matter of paramount importance in the church of God. It must never become secondary.

God does not save sinners apart from the preaching of the gospel. The issue is not can he do so, but has he chosen to do so. Let the Word of God alone settle the matter. Read Romans 1:15–16, James 1:18, and 1 Peter 1:23–25. Gospel preaching is God's ordained means of saving sinners. God sent Philip to preach Christ to the Ethiopian Eunuch precisely because that Eunuch could not understand Isaiah 53 until some man sent of God showed him of whom the prophet spoke (Acts 8:26–35). This is the reason for placing such high importance upon the public ministry of the Word. Nothing is so important as the preaching of the gospel. If you care for your soul, let nothing keep you from hearing God's servant preach his gospel. If you care for the souls of others, do everything within your power to get them under the sound of the gospel. If you care for the souls of men and women around the world, give generously for the furtherance of the gospel through missionary endeavors.

God will save his elect by the preaching of the gospel. Read verse 18 again carefully. God's servants are not beating the air. God has sent them to open the eyes of chosen sinners and turn their hearts to the Lord. Gospel preachers are men on the trail of Christ's sheep. They seek the salvation of God's elect. And they shall not fail! They preach with the confident expectation of success. God has promised to honor his Word (Isaiah 55:11; Romans 1:16–17; Hebrews 4:12). Our labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58). God will save his elect by the means he has ordained.

One more obvious lesson to be learned from this passage is the fact that ALL WHO ARE CALLED OF GOD WILLINGLY REPENT AND TURN TO HIM IN FAITH (verses 19–20). Divine sovereignty does not nullify human responsibility any more than it nullifies human instrumentality. In election, redemption, and regeneration, the sinner is completely passive. But as soon as a person is called of God, he is fully active.

No sinner is saved without repentance (Luke 13:3, 5; Acts 5:30–31; Romans 2:4). Without question, repentance is the gift of God. But God does not repent for us. We must repent. Indeed, repentance is a voluntary act of a renewed heart. It is a change of mind, a change of manners, a change of motives, and a change of masters. Read Psalms 32 and 51 and learn what repentance is from the man after God's own heart.

No one can be saved who does not turn to God by faith in Christ. No sinner will turn to God until God turns him. No sinner will trust Christ until God gives him faith. Yet, we must believe on Christ (Acts 16:31; Mark 16:15–16). Conversion is a heart work. It is believing on the Lord Jesus Christ with all your heart, trusting him alone as Lord and Savior (Romans 10:9–13; 1 Corinthians 1:30–31; Philippians 3:3).

And all who repent and turn to God in true faith will do works which evidence repentance. Salvation is not in any measure dependent upon our works. But all saved people, in the tenor of their lives, walk in good works (Romans 6:11–18; Ephesians 2:8–10; Titus 3:8; James 2:14–26). Good works are works of obedience to the Word of God, works of love to Christ and his people, and works of faith. Good works are the fruit of faith in Christ. Faith in Christ is the fruit of regeneration. Regeneration is the fruit of redemption. And redemption is the fruit of election.

74. GOSPEL PREACHERS AND GOD'S SALVATION

Acts 26:16–23

The apostle Paul declared to Agrippa that the Lord Jesus Christ had appeared to him and made him a minister of the gospel so that he might be an instrument in the hands of God for the salvation of chosen sinners (verses 16–18). We recognize, of course, that salvation is not caused, accomplished, or dependent upon preachers. Salvation is God's work. "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). It is the gift of God (Romans 6:23). It is the work of his grace (Ephesians 2:8–9). But, "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21). Gospel preachers are instruments in the hands of God by which he saves his people. Salvation is not accomplished by preachers; but neither is it accomplished without the instrumentality of gospel preachers (Romans 10:13–17; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23–25). God, who ordained the salvation of an elect multitude, ordained the salvation of that elect multitude through the instrumentality of gospel preaching (2 Thessalonians 2:13–14). Though the Ethiopian Eunuch was chosen of God and redeemed by the blood of Christ, he could not understand the Scriptures and obtain God's salvation by faith in Christ until he came into contact with a God-sent preacher who "preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:26–39).

Preachers must never be exalted to a priestly roll. We have no priest but Christ. There is no merit or efficacy in any preacher to illuminate, convert, forgive, or sanctify anyone. No preacher can give sinners life and faith in Christ. That is the work of God the Holy Spirit. Yet, God's method of grace and his chosen instruments of good must not be despised. God's ordained means of grace is the preaching of the gospel of Christ. No sinner will ever obtain divine illumination, conversion to God, the forgiveness of sins, sanctification, and faith in Christ apart from the preaching of the gospel. Therefore, those men who faithfully preach the gospel of God's free and sovereign grace in Christ are to be loved and highly esteemed for their work's sake (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; Isaiah 52:7). Salvation comes to sinners by faith in Christ; and faith in Christ comes by the preaching of the gospel. In the verses under consideration, the Holy Spirit records seven things God does for sinners when he saves them by his almighty grace through the preaching of the gospel. When God saves a sinner …

First, HE OPENS THE EYES OF THE BLIND. All are spiritually blind by nature, totally ignorant of the things of God. But when God saves sinners, he sends a man to preach the gospel to them in the power of the Holy Spirit, "to open their eyes." The preacher cannot do the work. Only the Holy Spirit can open spiritually blind eyes (John 3:3; 1 Corinthians 2:9–14; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Ephesians 1:17–18). The preacher is merely the instrument of illumination. He holds forth the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in Christ. When God opens a sinner's eyes he sees himself as a sinner, justly condemned (Psalm 51:4; Job 42:5–6; Isaiah 6:1–4; Romans 3:19; 7:9), and utterly incapable of justifying himself (Job 9:20, 30–33). God shows men their need of a substitute. Then he shows them the glory of Christ as the sinner's Substitute (

Romans 3:24–26).

Second, IN SALVATION, GOD TURNS THE WICKED "FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT AND FROM THE POWER OF SATAN TO GOD". Conversion is the proof of election, redemption, regeneration, and the effectual call. It is the work of God. True, believers turn to God with willing hearts, but only because they have been turned by God (Psalm 80:3, 7, 17; 85:4; Lamentations 5:21). Conversion is a heart work. It is more than a reformation of life. It is a turning of the heart to God. "Conversion", wrote Joseph Alleine, "is a deep work, a heart work. It goes throughout the man, throughout the mind, throughout the members, throughout the entire life." And conversion is a lifelong work. It is the commencement of a lifelong devotion to God. Believers are described by Peter as those who are continually "coming" to Christ until, at last, they come to him in Heaven (1 Peter 2:4).

Third, IN SALVATION, GOD GRANTS TO CHOSEN SINNERS "THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS". This is what convicted sinners want and need above all else. It is the first thing desired of God. The first prayer of every saved sinner is the prayer of the publican, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." The sweetest words ever heard on earth are the words of Christ, spoken to repenting sinners, "Your sins be forgiven you!" Guilt is terrible. Forgiveness is glorious! God's forgiveness of the believer's sins is A FAITHFUL FORGIVENESS promised in the covenant (1 John 1:9; Jeremiah 31:34), A JUST FORGIVENESS purchased, secured, and demanded by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 1:6), A FULL FORGIVENESS, including all sin, past, present, and future (Isaiah 43:25; 44:22), and AN EVERLASTING, IRREVOCABLE FORGIVENESS (Romans 4:8; Jeremiah 50:20). Once bestowed, it can never be denied or taken away. This forgiveness cannot be purchased with money or earned by the merits of good works. It is the free grace gift of God, received by the hand of faith. Trusting Christ, sinners obtain "the forgiveness of sins".

Fourth, IN SALVATION, GOD BESTOWS UPON FORGIVEN SINNERS AN ETERNAL INHERITANCE OF GRACE AND GLORY IN CHRIST, an "inheritance among them which are sanctified." This inheritance is something we enjoy now, for Christ is our portion now, and in him we now possess all the blessings of grace (Ephesians 1:3). But Paul's reference is obviously to the believer's eternal, heavenly inheritance. All who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ are "heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17). It is an inheritance of grace. It belongs to every child of God equally and completely. There are no degrees of reward in Heaven! How can anyone who believes in salvation by grace alone imagine that some part of heaven's glorious inheritance is earned or lost by works, or the lack of them? Heavenly glory is simply the climax and completion of saving grace.

Fifth, WHEN GOD SAVES SINNERS, HE COMPLETELY SANCTIFIES THEM BY HIS GRACE. The Lord Jesus declared to Paul that, just as we are saved and forgiven by faith, we are "sanctified by faith that is in" him. Most people foolishly imagine that sanctification (holiness) is a matter of progressive effort and work. It is not! Sanctification is altogether the gift and work of grace, received by faith in Christ. We were separated unto God in holy election (Jude 1), declared to be holy by the blood of Christ in justification (Hebrews 10:10–14), and given a holy nature by God the Holy Spirit in regeneration (2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 3:9). We grow in grace, love, faith, etc. Every living thing grows. But we do not grow in holiness, righteousness, and sanctification. Our standing before God never varies. We are perfect and complete in Christ (Colossians 2:10).

Sixth, IN SALVATION, GOD GIVES SINNERS FAITH IN CHRIST. The Lord Jesus declares that all these blessings of grace are "by faith that is in" him. This faith is the gift of God, the operation of his grace (Ephesians 1:19; 2:8; Colossians 2:12; Philippians 1:29). Faith is not the cause of grace, but the gift of grace and the evidence of grace (Hebrews 11:1). And this faith is created in sinners by the power of God the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel (Romans 10:17).

Seventh, WHEN GOD SAVES A REBEL, HE MAKES HIM A WILLINGLY OBEDIENT SERVANT, as he did Saul of Tarsus (v. 19). Grace conquers the heart, subdues the will, and makes those who naturally hate God (Romans 8:7) willing servants of God. Believers bow to Christ and gladly take his yoke upon them (Matthew 11:28–30). Where there is no surrender to the rule of Christ as Lord there is no faith in Christ as Savior (Luke 14:25–33).

75. ALMOST PERSUADED, BUT ALTOGETHER LOST

Acts 26:24–32

Agrippa was a mighty man of wealth, power, and respectability. He was king over Judea. Unlike his predecessors or his peers, Aprippa was a thoughtful, religious man. He had embraced the tenets of the Jews' religion, avowed his faith in the Old Testament Scriptures, and enjoyed a rare privilege and opportunity. Agrippa heard the man of God deliver a message from God in the power of God! He not only heard Paul preach, he was fully convinced of the truthfulness of Paul's message. The way of life and salvation was set before him. Before his very eyes, Jesus Christ crucified was evidently set forth. The door of mercy was opened to him. He had opportunity to enter it. But this man willfully disobeyed the command of the gospel. In the hour of opportunity, he trifled. When God spoke, he stopped his ears. He was, according to his own words, "almost persuaded" to be a Christian, but was altogether lost. In these verses, the Holy Spirit holds Agrippa before the eyes of eternity bound souls as a beacon to warn them that God will not trifle with those who trifle with the gospel!

Are you, like the Jews of Elijah's day, halting between two opinions, convinced that the gospel of God's free, saving grace in Christ is true, yet continuing in the path of unbelief and rebellion? You may compliment yourself that you are "almost persuaded". You may think it is a commendable thing to be like the rich young ruler who was near the kingdom of God (Mark 12:34). Other people may compliment you for your apparent interest in the things of God. Be warned: To be near the kingdom is to be altogether outside the kingdom! To be almost persuaded is to be altogether lost! If you continue halting between two opinions, you will soon be confirmed in reprobate unbelief. If you continue to trifle with God, you will soon be destroyed by God (Proverbs 1:23–33; 29:1). You must enter the door of mercy while it is open. God's ambassador warns you, "Receive not the grace of God in vain … Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (1 Corinthians 6:1–2).

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN? A Christian is one who is anointed of God, a follower of Christ, one who is like Christ. That is what the word "Christian" means. Nothing in this world can properly be called "Christian" except the church and people of our God. Paul tells us what a Christian is in verse 18. A Christian is a person who is taught of God, one whose eyes God has opened to see and know the truth (John 6:44–45). Being taught of God, all true believers "have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16) to understand spiritual things. A Christian is a person who has been taught of God to acknowledge and confess his sin (1 John 1:9), trust the God-man, Jesus Christ, as his only sin-atoning Substitute and Savior (1 Corinthians 1:30), and to gratefully confess, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10). Christians are sinners who have been transformed by the grace and power of God, turned "from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christians have received the forgiveness of sins by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 1:7). All sins, past, present, and future, are forgiven us through our Savior's blood. Blessed they are to whom God will not impute sin (Psalm 32:1–2; Romans 4:8). A Christian is a person whose treasure is in Heaven. We have an inheritance among the saints to which we were predestined in eternity (Ephesians 1:11), which was earned, purchased, and claimed for us by Christ our forerunner (Ephesians 1:11; Hebrews 6:20), and which we shall fully possess at last (John 14:1–3). All true Christians are sanctified by the grace of God. That is to say, God has made them holy by his grace in Christ, so that all who are Christians are saints, being made holy by the imputed righteousness of Christ in justification (Romans 3:24–26; 5:19) and the imparted righteousness of Christ in regeneration (1 John 3:9). In short, a Christian is a person who trusts the Lord Jesus Christ. We are saved by "faith that is in" him. We have been effectually taught of God to trust the Lord Jesus Christ. Briefly stated, that is what a Christian is. Those who have not experienced and do not possess these graces are not Christians.

HOW DID PAUL PERSUADE AGRIPPA TO TRUST CHRIST AND BE A CHRISTIAN? He was not indifferent to this man's soul. Knowing the terror of the Lord, he persuaded him to come to Christ (1 Corinthians 5:11) with four strong arguments. First, he appealed to the Word of God (verses 22). His only argument was, "Thus says the Lord." This is the only weapon of our warfare. We do not appeal to science, history, or logic as a buttress for faith. Rather, we demand that all men bow to the Word of God. Believing God's Word as a revelation from him is the only way anyone can be saved (1 John 4:10–14). Second, Paul testified to Agrippa of what he had personally experienced of the grace of God (verses 6–19). He told the king what the Lord had done for him. That is good witnessing! Everyone can tell what he has experienced; and there is not better way to persuade sinners than telling them what God has done for you as a sinner. Third, the apostle gave Agrippa a clear statement of the historic facts of the gospel (v. 23). God became incarnate (John 1:14). The incarnate Christ bore the sins of his people upon the cross as the sinner's Substitute, satisfying Divine justice for all his people by his vicarious death (

2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 9:26; 1 Peter 3:18). He arose from the dead on the third day (Romans 4:25), ascended into Heaven, and makes intercession there as an Advocate and High Priest for his people (1 John 2:1–2). This risen, exalted Christ is able to save to the uttermost all who trust him (Hebrews 7:25; John 17:2). Then, Paul laid the axe to the root of the tree, demanding that his captor openly acknowledge the claims of Christ in the gospel (verses 27–29). Though he was wearing Agrippa's chains, Paul was still the servant of Christ, and he boldly behaved as the servant of Christ, even to the point of laying his life on the line! Agrippa must have been shocked! Yet, he could not deny the truthfulness of Paul's message. So the question must be raised—If he was convinced of the message Paul preached …

WHY WAS THIS MAN ONLY "ALMOST PERSUADED?" Why will men and women who know that the gospel is true persist in willful rebellion to its claims? For the same reasons Agrippa did. There was one sitting by his side he was unwilling to give up. Bernice was his sister, a beautiful, but shameless woman. She and Agrippa were living together in an incestuous relationship. If he had laid hold on Christ, he must let Bernice go; but he would not do so. This was his point of rebellion. That is where God always meets a sinner. There was another setting beside Agrippa, whose disapproval he did not want. Festus was lower in rank than Agrippa, but if he desired, he could cause the king much trouble with Caesar. It was, at least in part, the fear of man that kept Agrippa from Christ, Paul was probably an obstacle to his faith as well. He saw the bonds, imprisonment, shame, sorrow, and reproach that Paul had to endure for Christ, and was unwilling to pay that price. He counted the cost (Matthew 13:44–46; Luke 14:28) and said, "Christ is not worth that to me!" But, primarily, the problem was in his own heart. Agrippa loved the world, the pomp, the pleasures, the fame, the riches, the sin, the power, and the comfort of the world. He was almost persuaded, but he could not and would not forsake the world and follow Christ. Will you?

A plane once took off from Chicago bound for Mexico with a bad ring in the engine. One of the passengers was almost persuaded by his wife not to board the plane; but he did. The plane crashed; and he died. A man saw a penny-stock rising on the market. He was almost persuaded not to invest his money. But he decided to risk everything; and he lost everything. A man had a sharp pain in his chest and a numbness in his arms. He was a little fearful. His wife almost persuaded him to go the emergency room. But the pain subsided; and he died of a heart attack. The warning the Holy Spirit gives us by this man Agrippa is written in clear letters: TO BE ALMOST PERSUADED IS TO BE ALTOGETHER LOST! IF YOU MEET GOD ALMOST PERSUADED, YOU WILL BE ALTOGETHER LOST FOREVER!

76. PREPARATION FOR THE STORM

Acts 27:1–44

After being a prisoner at Caesarea for more than two years, Paul was finally sent to Rome. There he would make his personal appeal to Caesar. While en route to Rome, traveling by sea, a terrible storm arose from the northeast which placed the whole company in great danger. Acts 27 is a detailed account of that storm. We need no more than an atlas and common sense to understand the literal, historical events recorded in this chapter. But the chapter is recorded to give us more than historical data. It is recorded in the Volume of Inspiration to give us practical, spiritual, gospel instruction (2 Timothy 3:16).

In Paul's day the sea could be a terrible thing. The sailor had no compass. So when the sun and the stars were blotted out, he had no idea where he was or where he was going. He had no engine to propel his ship through the mighty winds and raging waters. His sails and oars were helpless before the force of a hurricane. The imagery of the sea's terror is used throughout the Word of God. Jonah was thrown into the sea to appease its wrath (Jon. 1:12–15). The disciples were terribly frightened on the Sea of Galilee and cried out to the Master to save them (Mark 4:38). In 2 Corinthians 11 Paul tells us he was shipwrecked three times and spent a night and a day in the deep. Jude compares the influence of false religion to the "raging waves of the sea" (Jude 13). John saw the "beast rise up out of the sea" (Rev. 13:1). In Revelation 21:1 he says, in the new creation there shall be "no more sea", as if to indicate that the sea is a symbol of terrible calamity and evil. In literature, poetry, and Scripture, our life in this world is compared to a voyage across a vast sea (Job 9:29). As we sail across the vast sea of life in this world we all must pass through many storms. The Book of God shows us how to prepare for and survive those storms. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" the spiritual lessons of this chapter.

First, we learn that THINGS SELDOM HAPPEN ACCORDING TO OUR DESIRES, PLANS, AND EXPECTATIONS (verses 1–8). "The best laid plans of mice and men are soon destroyed." Paul had planned to go to Rome on his way to Spain. This band of soldiers took their prisoners on board the ship, and "launched, meaning to sail by the coasts of Asia" (v. 2). They mapped out their course, prepared for their voyage, and expected to have smooth sailing to Rome by the Asian coasts. But Divine providence interfered with their well-laid plans. A storm arose and "the winds were contrary" (v. 4), contrary to their plans! When we are making our plans, we will be wise to consider the storms ahead and submit our will to God's will, even in our plans (James 4:13–15). Life is full of storms and contrary winds (Job 5:6; 14:1). They usually arise suddenly without warning. Without question, the greatest storm a person will ever face is the storm of his own sin. When a person comes face to face with his sin, the mighty wind of conviction and judgment is overwhelming. He feels the storm of God's wrath in his soul (Nah. 1:2–3). But, blessed be God, in Christ Jesus there is a refuge for sinners and a hiding place for the guilty (Isaiah 4:6; 32:2).

Secondly, we are here shown that OUR STORMS ARE OFTEN THE FRUIT OF DISOBEDIENCE TO THE WILL OF GOD (verses 9–14). I do not suggest that all trials are the result of some particular sin. But many of our trials and sorrows could be avoided by simple obedience to our God. If these men had just given heed to the Word of God, they would not have suffered the terrible shipwreck recorded in this chapter. Read these verses carefully and learn their obvious lessons. The will of God is usually contrary to the opinion of the majority (v. 11). The will of God is always contrary to the pleasures and accommodations of the flesh (v. 12). The path of least resistance is always most appealing to the flesh; but usually it is the path to destruction (verses 13–14). That which God plainly reveals is his will; and disobedience to his revealed will is disastrous. No matter how unreasonable, unpleasant, or costly it seems to be to obey God, "whatever he says unto you, do it" (John 2:5). Obedience may be costly; but disobedience is always more costly. Faith in Christ evidences itself by obedience to Christ (Proverbs 3:5–6).

Thirdly, WHEN THE STORM COMES, THE ONLY COURSE OF SAFETY IS SURRENDER (verses 15–20). Luke says, "When the ship was caught, and could not bear up into (against) the wind, we let her drive." That is all we can do. Just hold on and "let her drive." This is not an act of fatalism. They had done all they could. They worked hard. They used all the help they could get. They lightened their load. They even threw all the tacklings overboard. But all hope of deliverance by their hands was gone. So they hoisted their sails and "let her drive." The men in command of the ship, (If you can imagine that without laughing!), had no fear of God. But for Luke, Paul and Aristarchus, this was an act of faith. Luke says, "We let her drive." They knew who was in command of the ship! They realized who had sent the storm (Isaiah 45:7; Psalm 107:25; Nah. 1:3; Jon. 1:4; Amos 3:6). Like Eli of old, they humbled themselves under the hand of God, saying, "It is the Lord: let him do what seems him good" (1 Samuel 3:18; James 4:7, 10). Turning to the Lord in submission and faith, they found peace (Isaiah 26:3–4; Psalm 42:11). Bow to the will of Christ. Slip your neck into his yoke, and you will find peace (Matthew 11:29). Trust the wisdom, grace, and promise of God. Hoist the sails of your little ship into the wind of Divine providence, and "let her drive" (Romans 8:28).

Fourthly, WHEN THE STORM COMES, SEEK A WORD FROM GOD TO COMFORT, INSTRUCT, AND DIRECT YOU THROUGH IT (verses 21–25). If you would find comfort in trouble, bury yourself in the Book of Consolation (Romans 15:4). Paul found a word from God, believed it, and faithfully delivered it, even in the midst of the storm. It was a word of stern reproof (v. 21) and of cheering assurance (verses 22–24).

Fifthly, NO MATTER HOW SEVERE THE STORM IS, STAY IN THE SHIP (verses 26–38). Some of the shipmen were about to forsake the ship. They let down the lifeboat and were about to leave when Paul said, "Except these abide in the ship, you cannot be saved." Immediately, the soldiers cut the ropes and let the boat fall. They did not stand around arguing about Divine predestination and human responsibility. They cut the ropes! They cut off every other source of hope and cast themselves upon the Word of God. They took only what they needed and threw everything else overboard (verses 19, 38). Storms have a way of changing values and making all the things of this world appear to be what they really are—vanity! They stayed in the ship and were saved (v. 37). When storms arise, cling to Christ. Stay in the good ship grace. Only those who endure the trials and storms of life, only those who persevere in faith are saved (Matthew 10:20; John 8:31; 15:9; Colossians 1:23; Hebrews 3:6, 14; James 1:12;

Acts 13:43; 14:22).

Sixthly, SET YOUR HEART UPON CHRIST ALONE (verses 39–40). Seek him and nothing else. Throw everything else to the wind. Ask for nothing, care for nothing, and pursue nothing but Christ, and make "toward shore" (Colossians 3:1–3). If Christ is all your desire, you shall have all your desire; and the storms of life will do you no harm.

Seventhly, we see in this chapter that OUR GOD WILL GRACIOUSLY BRING US THROUGH THE STORM INTO OUR DESIRED HAVEN OF REST (verses 41–44). Some swam to safety. Some floated on boards. Some rode on broken pieces of the ship. But when they came to that place where two seas met, they all came to shore safely. "And so it came to pass, they escaped all safe to land." So it shall be with all God's elect (1 Peter 5:10–11; Jude 24–25; Romans 8:35–39).

77. DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

Acts 27:21–44

God is totally sovereign and man is totally responsible. Both of these truths are plainly revealed in Holy Scripture and must be believed by all who acknowledge the authority of the Word of God. God's sovereignty does not relieve man of responsibility. And man's responsibility does not negate God's sovereignty. Both of these blessed gospel truths are illustrated in the passage before us.

In verse 24, the angel of the Lord spoke to Paul, "Saying, Fear not, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God has given you all them that sail with you." Paul, believing God, said, "There shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship" (v. 22). That is God's sovereign decree, immutable, unalterable, and certain. God purposed it, and it must come to pass. Not all the power of Hell could prevent it. God says, "I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it" (Isaiah 46:11).

Did that sovereign decree relieve the men on board the ship of all responsibility? Did God's decree mean that they would be saved no matter what they might do? Did God's sure and certain purpose mean that these 276 men were no longer obliged to obey him? Not on your life! In verse 31, Paul shows us the place of human responsibility. Some of the shipmen panicked in the storm and were about to abandon the ship. Paul said, "Except these abide in the ship, you cannot be saved." God had ordained their safety and deliverance from the storm. So their safety and deliverance were matters of absolute certainty. Yet, they could only be saved if they remained in the ship; and they were responsible to do so. If they abandoned the ship, they would all have been lost. If they stayed in the ship, they would all be saved. The burden of responsibility lay squarely upon their shoulders. If they were saved, it would be God's work, and God's work alone. If they were lost, it would be their work, and their work alone.

In the end, God's purpose was accomplished. The ship was lost and the cargo was lost, but every man on board the ship was saved, according to God's unalterable purpose. When the ship was wrecked, "the soldiers' counsel was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim out, and escape. But (God graciously intervened and) the centurion, willing to save Paul, kept them from their purpose, and commanded that they which could swim should cast themselves first into the sea, and get to land: and the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship. And so it came to pass (Exactly as God had ordained!) that they escaped all safe to land" (verses 42–44).

THE EVENTS RECORDED IN ACTS 27:21–44 CLEARLY ILLUSTRATE GOD'S ABSOLUTE SOVEREIGNTY AND MAN'S COMPLETE RESPONSIBILITY IN THE MATTER OF SALVATION. Salvation is accomplished entirely by the sovereign, eternal purpose and work of the triune God (Ephesians 1:3–14). Yet, every sinner is responsible to repent and believe the gospel, to trust the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 17:30; 1 John 3:23). All who do so shall be saved; and all who refuse to do so shall be justly damned forever (Mark 15:16). Here are eight, irrefutable facts, plainly revealed in the Word of God. Study them carefully. Ask God the Holy Spirit to give you an understanding of them.

1. God the Father has a people in this world whom he has sovereignly chosen and determined to save in eternal, electing love (Ephesians 1:3–6; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14; Romans 9:11–18).

2. The Lord God eternally predestined all things that come to pass in time to secure the salvation of his elect, for the gory of his own great name (Romans 8:28–30; Ephesians 1:5, 11).

3. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for and effectually redeemed all whom God the Father chose and purposed to save in eternity (Isaiah 53:8; Matthew 1:21; Galatians 3:13; Hebrews 9:12).

4. God the Holy Spirit regenerates all who were chosen in eternity and redeemed at Calvary, by the power of his irresistible grace, and causes them to trust Christ (Ephesians 2:1–6; John 3:3–8; Psalm 65:4; 110:3).

5. God sovereignly rules all things in providence with the absolute power of omnipotence and the total wisdom of omniscience, according to his eternal purpose of grace, for the salvation of his elect (Romans 8:28; John 17:2).

6. All God's elect, all true believers, are eternally and infallibly secure in Christ, preserved and kept in him by the power and grace of God (John 10:27–30; Philippians 1:6; 1 Peter 1:5; Jude 24–25).

7. Every sinner who trusts the Lord Jesus Christ shall be saved (John 3:14–16; Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9–13).

8. All who despise God's free grace in Christ and refuse to trust him shall be justly damned forever (Proverbs 1:23–33).

These are matters of divine revelation. They are things clearly stated in the Word of God. All who are saved are saved by God's work alone. All who are damned are damned by their own work alone. Read Acts 27:21–44 again and see how it illustrates these truths of Holy Scripture.

IT WAS THE PURPOSE OF GOD TO SAVE EVERY PERSON IN THE SHIP (verses 21–25). God said he would save them. Therefore, he was honor bound to do so. If even one were to be lost, God's word would be broken, his honor would be lost, and the Almighty would be found a liar! So it is with his elect! IN ORDER FOR THOSE WHOM GOD PURPOSED TO SAVE TO ACTUALLY BE SAVED, THEY HAD TO OBEY HIS WORD (verses 29–34). God required them to stay in the ship. Had they not done so, they would have perished. But once they committed themselves to the Lord God, they were given the cheering assurance of his saving purpose (verses 34–35). Even so, God requires us to trust Christ alone for salvation. All who trust him are assured of God's grace (1 John 5:10–13). All who refuse to obey the gospel shall perish by their unbelief (John 3:18). GOD GRACIOUSLY OVERRULES ALL OBSTACLES TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSE OF GRACE TOWARD HIS ELECT (verses 41–44). Carefully read Psalm 76:10 and Proverbs 16:1, 4, 9, and 33, and understand that nothing is a hindrance to God. All things are his servants, sovereignly used by him to accomplish his purpose of grace toward his elect. So it came to pass that ALL WHOM GOD PURPOSED TO SAVE WERE SAVED (v. 44). God said, "There shall be no loss of any man's life among you … So it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land." Even so, in the end all God's elect shall be saved (Romans 11:25, 33–36). Believe God, and be of good cheer. His purpose is sure (Romans 8:28–39).

78. "I BELIEVE GOD"

Acts 27:18–25

Here is a tried, tempest tossed believer full of comfort and comforting others. He describes the source and cause of his comfort in three words—"I believe God." Because he believed God, Paul was confident that God would do what he said. He was full of comfort regarding his own life and destiny. And he had a word of comfort for those who were in the tempest tossed ship with him. What an example of faith the Holy Spirit here holds before us!

It is astonishing that we should need examples of faith and encouragements to believe God, but we do. Faith in our God should be, to regenerate men and women, a matter of fact. But often our hearts blush with shame because of unbelief. One of the most glaring evidences of human depravity is the fact that even men and women who are born of God struggle with unbelief. We are so fallen, so depraved, even in our regenerate state, that we dare question and doubt the living God! Some little trial comes our way, some slight ruffle, and we are out of sorts. We begin to worry, murmur, complain, and feel sorry for ourselves. How easily our hearts are troubled! We ought to trust our God completely. In all things he is true and faithful. His covenant is sure. His oath stands fast. His word cannot be broken. His promises are all yes and amen in Christ Jesus. God cannot lie. It is impossible for him to deny himself. We ought to trust him unreservedly. That which God has promised we have every reason to believe.

MEDITATE UPON PAUL'S STATEMENT IN THE CONTEXT IN WHICH IT IS FOUND. As you read Acts 27, you cannot avoid the fact that the primary theme of the narrative is not the journey, or even the storm at sea, but the faith of a man who believed God. That is the context in which we find these words—"I believe God."

Paul's faith was based upon God's revelation. He said, "I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me" (v. 25). God had told him something, and he believed it. His faith was based upon the Word of God. Granted, it was a special revelation. An angel of God told him what God would do. But we do not need to envy the source of Paul's revelation. We have the written, complete Word of God, which is a more sure word of prophecy than anything else could be (2 Peter 1:16–21). It is far better to have God's written Word than to have a vision, a mountaintop experience, or even an angelic visitation (Hebrews 1:1–3).

Paul's faith in God involved a conviction of the absolute certainty that God would do all that he said. "It shall be even as it was told me." He did not say, "It may be," or "I hope it shall be," or "God wants it to be." He said, "It shall be!" What God has spoken shall be. What God has caused to be written in his Word shall come to pass. When the book of history is complete and God stamps "The End" upon it, it will in all things tally with that which God has spoken in his Word (

1 Peter 1:24–25; Isaiah 40:8; Luke 16:17).

Paul's faith gave him hope when all hope was gone. He said, "I believe God," when, to all outward appearance, "all hope that (they) should be saved was taken away" (v. 20). It is one thing to believe God when everything is going in the direction of God's promise; but it is something else to believe God in a sinking ship when everything appears to contradict God's promise. That requires faith. Faith does not trust God because providence is smooth. And faith does not distrust God because providence is contrary. Faith trust God's Revelation, God's Word, even when everything appears to contradict it. Paul had nothing upon which to hang his faith but the Word of God; and the same is true of us. God hung the world upon nothing but his word. Shall we not hang our faith upon that which God has hung the world!

Because he believed God, Paul very plainly and boldly confessed his faith before men. He was in a ship full of convicted felons, guarded by Roman soldiers and rugged seamen. These were not nice, church going, religious people, but rugged men of notoriously vile character. Yet, Paul spoke out plainly for the glory of God and confessed his faith in him. Indeed, all who believe God confess their faith in him. They do so by believer's baptism (Romans 6:4–6), by being his witnesses to the world around them (Acts 1:8), and in the teeth of opposition (Acts 4:10–12). We should make everyone around us conscious of our conviction that God is true and that he is to be trusted.

Paul confessed his faith, but more importantly, he acted like a man who believed God. When others were hysterical, Paul was calm. Why? He believed God. His faith was real. For most people religion is nothing but pious fiction. They look upon the promises of God as pretty, sentimental things to talk about. They view divine providence as a nice, theological idea. Not Paul! He acted like a man who believed God. Trusting God, he rested himself upon the purpose, promise, and providence of his heavenly Father.

THIS STATEMENT, "I BELIEVE GOD," APPLIES TO ALL MATTERS OF DOCTRINE, ALL AREAS OF A BELIEVER'S LIFE AND EXPERIENCE, AND TO ALL THAT CONCERNS OUR HOPE REGARDING THE WORLD TO COME. It is qualified and limited only by the Word of God itself (2 Corinthians 1:20). Take down the Book of God from its place on your shelf and search out its promises. If you meet the character of the one described in the promise, believe it and apply it to yourself: PROMISES TO SINNERS (Isaiah 55:6–7; Matthew 11:28–30; Mark 16:16; John 3:14–18; 1 John 1:9), PROMISES TO SINNING SAINTS (1 John 2:1–2; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Psalm 89:19–36; 2 Chronicles 7:14), PROMISES TO HIS AFFLICTED CHILDREN (Isaiah 41:10–11; 43:1–5; Acts 18:10; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Romans 8:28; Hebrews 13:5), PROMISES TO HIS CHURCH (1 Corinthians 15:58; Isaiah 55:11; Ecclesiastes 11:1; Psalm 126:5–6), PROMISES TO HIS NEEDY PEOPLE (Philippians 4:19; Matthew 6:25–34), PROMISES TO THEM THAT HONOR HIM (1 Samuel 2:30; Malachi 3:10; Matthew 6:33; Luke 6:38), PROMISES TO THEM THAT LOOK FOR CHRIST'S COMING (James 1:12; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; 2 Timothy 1:12).

THE TRIUNE GOD, FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT, MADE CERTAIN PROMISES TO ONE ANOTHER IN THE EVERLASTING COVENANT OF GRACE, WHICH MUST AND SHALL BE FULFILLED (2 Samuel 23:5; Jeremiah 31:31–34; 32:38–40). The Son of God promised to redeem, justify, and save all God's elect (Hebrews 10:5–10; John 10:16). God the Father promised his Son all his elect to be the reward of his soul's travail (Isaiah 53:9–12; Psalm 2:8; 22:30). God the Holy Spirit promised to regenerate, call, seal, and preserve every chosen, redeemed sinner by almighty, irresistible grace (Ephesians 1:13–14; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14).

GOD HAS MADE CERTAIN PROMISES IN HIS WORD REGARDING THE FUTURE. With regard to the future, every believer ought to say with Paul, "I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me." He will yet hear and answer the prayers of his people (1 John 5:14–15). God will yet preserve every believer unto his heavenly kingdom (Philippians 1:6). God will yet send his Son to this earth in his glorious second advent to make all things new and bring his elect into everlasting glory (Rev. 21:1–5; John 14:1–3).

Happy is that person who can speak with honesty and say, "I believe God." Blessed are they who believe the doctrine of his Word, the rule of his providence, and the promises of his grace. Forever blessed are those sinners upon the earth who believe the record God has given concerning his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 5:10–13). Do you believe God?

79. "BE OF GOOD CHEER"

Acts 27:20–25

"When neither sun nor stars in many days appeared, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope that we should be saved was taken away." In those circumstances, Paul stood up and said, "I exhort you to be of good cheer." When all hope was gone, Paul said, "Be of good cheer." You can imagine the response. "Come on now, Paul. What do you mean, 'Be of good cheer!' Have you lost your mind? We are going to be wrecked, and there is nothing we can do!" "Nevertheless," Paul says, "I exhort you to be of good cheer." Remember, he had advised them not to set sail in the first place, warning them of imminent danger (v. 10). And, though he reminded them that they should have listened to him and that their present trouble was their own fault, (v. 21), yet, he says, "Be of good cheer." Assuring them by the Word of God that not one of them would be lost, he repeated himself, saying, "Sirs, be of good cheer."

If Paul could speak those words to reprobate, unbelieving men regarding deliverance from a storm at sea, surely every believer is justified in saying to himself with regard to all the affairs of his life, "Be of good cheer." It does not matter what your circumstances in this world are, if you belong to God, if you are born of his Spirit, you have every reason to "be of good cheer." There is nothing holy or sanctifying about gloominess, despondency, and morbid pessimism. In fact, these things are the exact opposites of holiness and sanctification. God the Holy Spirit is our Comforter, not our tormentor! He comes to bring comfort and cheer, not despair and gloom. Our heavenly Father delights to see his children of good cheer. And those who honor God most are those saints who walk before him with cheerful, believing hearts.

Search the Scriptures and see if the Lord God does not constantly say to his people in this world, "Be of good cheer" (Psalm 16:5–6; Proverbs 15:13, 15, 30; 17:22; Ecclesiastes 2:24; 9:8–10; Philippians 4:4). Among the first things named as the fruit of the Spirit is "joy" (Galatians 5:22). Believers should be people of perpetual joy and cheer! When all hope was gone, in so far as outward evidence was concerned, in the midst of terrible darkness and a raging storm, Paul found five reasons to "be of good cheer."

First, PAUL WAS CONSCIOUS OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD. In verse 23, he says, "There stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve." God was there with him in the midst of the storm! The angel of God stood by him and spoke to him! We too may be sure that when trouble comes to us, "The Lord is at hand" (Philippians 4:4). When all outward evidence of hope is gone, the Lord God will speak to you and say, "Be of good cheer." No, he will not speak to you by an audible voice. But he will speak to you by his Spirit, through his Word, assuring you of his presence to protect you (Isaiah 43:1–7), provide for you (2 Corinthians 12:9), and preserve you (Jude 24–25). Then, like Paul, you can say to others, "Be of good cheer, the Lord God is still on his throne. He is still in charge. He is still running things. The Lord knows what he is doing. He has not made a mistake. So, 'be of good cheer.' "

This episode on the sea was just one of many times when the Lord Jesus manifestly fulfilled his promise to Paul in which he said, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20). The same thing happened to him at Corinth (Acts 18:10), at Jerusalem (Acts 23:11), and at Rome (2 Timothy 4:16–17). Child of God, the Lord Jesus is with you too. In your times of great trouble and need, your God is with you. When the doctor says, "I'm very sorry, but I have to tell you, you have cancer,"—the Lord is with you. He will not forsake you. When the telephone rings and the somber voice on the line says, "I'm sorry to call, but there has been an accident. Your loved one has been killed,"—the Lord will be with you. So long as we live in this world, we must go through the deep waters of trouble and the fiery furnace of adversity. In the midst of problems, pains, and perplexities, let every believer be convinced of the presence of God, hear him say, "I will never leave you, nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5), and "be of good cheer."

Second, PAUL WAS CONSCIOUS OF THE FACT THAT HE BELONGED TO GOD. He said, "There stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve." If we can in the midst of our trials realize this great fact, that we belong to God, we will find reason to "be of good cheer", even in the midst of trouble. We sometimes sing, "Now I belong to Jesus." Is that a fact? Then be of good cheer! We who believe belong to Christ by divine predestination (Ephesians 1:4–6), divine purchase (Ephesians 1:7–12), and divine power (Ephesians 1:13–14).

We belong to Christ like a bride belongs to her husband. In the Old Testament and in the New, the relationship of Christ and his people is constantly compared to the intimate, loving union of a husband and wife (Ephesians 5:25–30; Song of Sol. 6:3). We belong to our God as a child belongs to his father. Donald Grey Barnhouse once suggested that as soon as the doctor cuts the umbilical cord that binds a baby to its mother, "God creates a sort of invisible cord that binds the baby to the father. It immediately transforms the man's nature and he begins to understand, 'That's my boy!' " When that happens, there is a blessed picture of our relationship to God. He loves us infinitely more than any earthly father ever loved his boy (

1 John 3:1). Again, we belong to our Lord as sheep belong to the shepherd. The Lord calls us his sheep. David Said, "The Lord is my Shepherd." The life and welfare of sheep are the responsibility of the shepherd charged with watching over them. And the Lord Jesus has promised to protect and keep his sheep (Isaiah 40:11; John 10:27–30). Someone once asked an old believer, "What do you do when you are in trouble?" He replied, "I look to Heaven and say, Lord, your property is in danger." That is how Paul felt. He belonged to God. He knew God would take care of him.

Third, PAUL WAS CONSCIOUS OF THE FACT THAT HE WAS GOD'S SERVANT. He was on business for God. He spoke plainly of God as him "Whom I serve." The law of the land is clear. If you are working for a company, that company is responsible for you. If you are injured while working for the company, the company must take care of you. The Lord God will do no less! If you are God's servant, doing God's business, he will take care of you. His honor is at stake. He promised, "Them that honor me, I will honor" (1 Samuel 2:30). "My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). "He shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways" (Psalm 91:11).

Fourth, PAUL WAS CONSCIOUS OF GOD'S TOTAL SOVEREIGNTY. He knew that the Lord God, to whom he belonged, whom he served, his heavenly Father, was as much in control of the storm as he is the calm. Therefore, being confident that his God would and could do all that he had said, he was of good cheer. Nothing, child of God, will sustain your soul in peace and cheer like the conscious realization of his absolute sovereignty over all things (Romans 8:28–30; 11:36).

Fifth, PAUL WAS FULLY CONVINCED OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS. God had made an absolute promise of deliverance and safety to Paul. Because he knew God to be faithful, he said, "I believe God," and exhorted all who were with him to "Be of good cheer." Do not ever imagine that anything takes God by surprise, or is beyond his control. He upholds all things by the Word of his power; and he upholds you in his great faithfulness. Therefore, "No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise up against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, says the Lord" (Isaiah 54:17).

"Be not dismayed Whatever betide, God will take care of you. Beneath His wings of love abide. God will take care of you. God will take care of you, Through every day, o'er all the way. He will take care of you. God will take care of you!"

I exhort you, therefore, "TO BE OF GOOD CHEER!"

80. THE RELIGION OF THE NATURAL MAN

Acts 28:1–10

In Acts 28 we find Paul and those who had been sailing with him on the Island of Melita. That island today is called Malta. It is found between Sicily and Africa, about 60 miles off the coast of Sicily.

The ship in which they were sailing was torn to pieces in a furious storm. But, according to the promise of God, all 276 men, passengers and crew, were safe on land. The survivors of the storm were drenched, weary, and cold, but they were alive! Divine providence had brought them to the Island of Malta because God was determined to be gracious to the Maltese people. Some of his elect were on the island who must be called by the preaching of the gospel. Therefore, God, who has his way in the whirlwind, directed the path of this hurricane to bring Paul to Malta. Here is another incidental, but marvelous illustration of the fact that "all things work together for good to them who love God (even before they come to love him), to them who are the called, according to his purpose (even before they are called)" (Romans 8:28).

The Maltese people are described by Luke as "barbarians". That does not necessarily mean that they were uncivilized, though that might also have been true. The word simply means that they were not Greeks, Romans, or Jews. They did not conform to the customs of these three dominant societies and did not speak their language.

It does not appear that God had ever before sent these barbarians a gospel preacher. Yet, they were naturally religious people. Their religion, as we see in this passage, made them both moral and charitable. It had a good effect upon them. They had nothing but the light of nature. But they walked in the light they had. Yet, they were lost, perishing men and women without the light of the gospel and the knowledge of Christ. Their religion restrained and, in measure, outwardly corrected the natural depravity of their hearts. But it could not save them. Natural religion, that which is learned and acquired by conscience and nature, cannot save. In order for lost men and women to be saved they must be brought to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel. As we look at Paul's encounter with the men of Malta, we are plainly taught six very important lessons.

First, WHEN GOD INTENDS TO SAVE SINNERS, HE ALWAYS SENDS THEM A GOSPEL PREACHER (v. 1). There is an elect multitude in this world who must be saved. All who were chosen by God the Father in eternity and redeemed by God the Son at Calvary must be regenerated and called by God the Holy Spirit at the appointed time of love. All God's elect must be saved (John 6:37–45; 10:16; Romans 11:26). Not only has God ordained the salvation of his people, he has also ordained the means by which it shall be accomplished; and God's appointed means of grace is the preaching of the gospel. Sinners are saved by hearing and believing the gospel of Christ (John 6:40; Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23–25). God never bypasses his ordained means of grace. If he intends to save a sinner, by one means or another, he will cause that sinner to hear the gospel. There are many illustrations of this fact in the Book of Acts (8:26–27; 9:10–18; 10:1–48; 16:9–15; 16:19–34). In Acts 28, we see God's hand of providence graciously arranging all things to bring Paul to Malta, so that he might preach the gospel to the elect among the barbarians there. Though the inhabitants of Malta knew it not, they were highly favored of God. By sending the hurricane that must have terrified them all, and perhaps killed many of the islanders, God had blessed them above all people. He used that hurricane to plant a gospel preacher in their midst (Isaiah 52:7). Let us carefully apply this to ourselves. Knowing that God has ordained the salvation of sinners by the preaching of the gospel, every believer ought to make it his business (by personal witness, distributing tracts, tapes, books, etc. and by the support of faithful ministries) to preach the gospel to all. And all who care for their souls should seize every opportunity to hear the gospel preached.

Second, ALL MEN BY NATURE ARE RELIGIOUS (verses 2–6). God has by creation given all men a consciousness of his Being, which they cannot escape (Romans 1:18–20). These men of Malta, though they were unlearned barbarians, displayed a certain natural religious creed. They knew that there is a God who governs the world. Their language displayed an awareness of the Creator's dominion of the universe. They did not know God. But they knew God is! They also knew that God is holy, righteous, and just. When they saw the snake hanging on Paul's hand, they concluded instinctively that God had judged him. These Maltese barbarians knew that God punishes sin. Though they had never heard or read the Book of God, the law of God was inscribed on their hearts (Romans 2:13–15). They knew that murder was a horrible crime and that no man can escape the justice of God. All men are religious, but …

Third, THE RELIGION OF NATURAL MEN IS ALWAYS PERVERTED. This is the reason why no one can be saved without the preaching of the gospel. No matter how sincere a man is. Without the revelation of Christ in the gospel, he gropes about in the blindness of his own depraved heart and the darkness of religious superstition, idolatry, and will worship. The men of Malta ignorantly supposed that those who suffer evil things are evil people. They presumed that a person's acceptance with God is determined by his own personal goodness. Free-will, works religion is the religion of all lost men. It is the religion of the depraved, fallen sons of Adam. It is always fickle because it is ruled, not by the Word of God, but by emotion and experience (verses 5–6).

Fourth, IT IS EVIDENT FROM THIS PASSAGE THAT ANYONE WHO WALKS IN THE LIGHT GOD GIVES HIM WILL BE GIVEN MORE LIGHT. These men had nothing but the light of nature. Yet, they honestly walked in that light which God had given them. At his own appointed time, God gave them the light of life. Evangelist Rolfe Barnard used to say, "God won't send honest people to Hell." And he was right. If a person despises the light God gives him, the light he has will be turned into darkness (Matthew 6:23). But if a person walks in and obeys the light God gives him, God will give him greater light (Isaiah 2:5; 1 John 1:7). No one will ever seek to know God and perish in ignorance of him!

Fifth, another thing evident in this passage is the fact that ANY MAN CALLED OF GOD TO PREACH THE GOSPEL WILL BE MANIFESTLY DISTINGUISHED BY GOD AS HIS MESSENGER. God's servants do not promote themselves, or call attention to themselves. Paul was not looking for snakes to handle. He was gathering firewood. If he could not serve the souls of men by preaching to them, he was glad to serve their bodies. By his condition as a prisoner, Paul was the most contemptible man in the crowd. But God providentially distinguished him from the others and caused men to pay attention to him. The Lord often uses two-legged snakes, who are determined to destroy the influence of his servants, as the very means by which he increases their usefulness; just as he used the viper that bit Paul to open the door of utterance before him.

Sixth, this passage exemplifies the fact that THOSE WHO HONOR GOD WILL BE HONORED BY GOD (verses 7–10). It appears that after hearing Paul preach the gospel, a very prominent man, Publius, believed on the Lord Jesus. He graciously received Paul and his companions into his house and lodged them. Having received a prophet in the name of a prophet, he received a prophet's reward (Matthew 10:41). When his father came down with a deadly fever, there was a prophet in his house with the power of God to heal him and all others who had need of healing. Those who faithfully served Paul were faithfully served by Paul. But, more importantly, those who honored and served God's servant were honored and served by God himself (1 Samuel 2:30). All who are wise will apply to themselves the exhortation Paul gave in this regard (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13).

81. "WE FOUND BRETHREN"

Acts 28:11–16

All God's saints in Heaven and on earth are one church, one kingdom, and one family. "There is no doubt," wrote A. A. Hodge, "but that if there be but one God, there is but one church; if there be but one Christ, there is but one church; if there be but one cross, there is but one church; if there be but one Holy Spirit, there is but one church." All the members of that one, universal church are brothers and sisters in Christ (Ephesians 3:15). In Christ, all true believers of all ages and all places are one (Ephesians 2:14; Colossians 3:11). All have the same Father. All have been adopted by the same, eternal, electing love. All have been redeemed by the same precious blood. All are called by the same Holy Spirit. All have the same Elder Brother. All are saved by the same grace. All are heirs to the same inheritance. All are married to the same Husband, members of the same body, and united to the same Head. Christ is not divided. And his body, the church, is not divided. All true believers are one in him. One of the greatest blessings God's saints possess on this earth and one of the greatest joys of Heaven is the fellowship of brethren. As we follow Paul and his companions from Malta to Rome, let us observe how precious his brethren were to him and learn from him to love and esteem one another as brethren in Christ.

PAUL WAS SEPARATED FROM HIS BRETHREN AT MALTA (v. 11). After being cast upon the island of Malta, Paul's preaching was obviously blessed of God to the conversion of some, perhaps many. Those who were converted became very gracious and generous. They highly valued the man who was used of God to bring the gospel of Christ to them (Isaiah 52:7; Romans 10:15). All winter long they lodged and fed Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus, highly honoring them as the servants of God. Paul had ministered to their spiritual needs. Therefore, they thought it only right that they should take care of his physical, material needs (1 Corinthians 9:9–11; Galatians 6:6). When the time came for Paul to leave Malta, these Maltese brethren supplied him and his friends with everything needed for their journey to Rome. God graciously provided his shipwrecked servants the refreshing consolation of newborn brethren among a barbarian people. What a tender parting their separation must have been! The young converts of Malta stand as examples to all believers in their generosity and esteem for God's servants. All who are privileged to sit under the ministry of a faithful gospel preacher should highly esteem that man for his work's sake (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13) and generously support him, supplying his material needs (Galatians 6:6). The Lord Jesus Christ considers that which is done to his servants as being done to him (Matthew 10:40–41). God's servants are not hirelings. They do not preach for gain. But the laborer is worthy of his pay (Luke 10:7). No man going to war should entangle himself with the affairs of this world (2 Timothy 2:4). No servant of God seeks material wealth. But it is only reasonable for those for whom he labors to provide for his daily needs with sufficient generosity so that he has no earthly, material concern for himself and his family. This generosity should extend beyond the local church caring for its own pastor. As we have opportunity, it is our responsibility to use our financial means to provide for faithful men everywhere so that they may give themselves entirely to the business of the gospel ministry.

Verse 11 gives us yet another incidental lesson about divine providence. Luke tells us that they sailed away from Malta on another ship from Alexandria. The ship which had been wrecked in the storm was also from Alexandria (27:6). Here are two ships, both from Alexandria, both going to Rome, both caught in a horrible storm. One of the ships sailed safely to Malta. The other was completely destroyed. The interesting point is this—The ship that sailed safely through the storm carried a crew of ungodly pagans who sailed under the sign of Caster and Pollux, gods of the sea! The ship that was wrecked, whose passengers and crew were cast out into the cold winter sea, carried some men who were beloved servants of God. It is no accident that Luke records this. The Holy Spirit intends for us to constantly be aware of the fact that favorable providence is no indication of God's favor, and providential hardships are no indications of his displeasure. God wrecked Paul whom he loved so that he might open the door for him to preach to a band of chosen Maltese barbarians. He left the other ship, loaded with men for whom he had no gracious designs, without disturbance or harm. Pity the people whom God leaves alone! Read Psalms 72:1–18 and 92:1–15 and thank God for his special providence, even when it brings you through bitter storms and freezing winter waters!

AFTER LEAVING THEIR BRETHREN AT MALTA, PAUL, LUKE, AND ARISTARCHUS FOUND BRETHREN AT PUTEOLI (verses 12–14). On the way to Rome, their ship docked for three days at Syracuse in Sicily and for a day at Rhegium. Apparently it was a trading vessel making its regular stops. Then they came to Puteoli, a city near Naples. From there Paul, his friends, and the soldiers would travel to Rome by land. But at Puteoli, Luke says, "We found brethren." Apparently, Paul had found favor in the eyes of the centurion who guarded him. He treated Paul with exceptional kindness, allowing him a great deal of liberty. The first thing Paul did when he came to Puteoli was search out and find the people who worshiped God there, his brethren (v. 14). How these people heard the gospel we are not told. But here, too, God had his elect. Persecution had scattered God's saints all over the Roman world. And whenever believers were scattered, the leaven of the gospel was spread. Paul made it his business to find those who worshiped God wherever he went. It was as natural for him to do so as it would be for any man passing through a town to look up his relatives who live there. The saints of God are a family. The blood that unites us is the blood of Christ. Paul looked up his brethren because he needed their fellowship. Sheep are social creatures. They do not like to be alone. They always run in flocks. The only time they are alone is when they are either sick or lost. Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus had been sailing for five days among ungodly, reprobate men with whom they had nothing in common. But at Puteoli they found brethren and were refreshed. Once they met these redeemed sinners they fell in love with one another immediately. The brethren at Puteoli constrained Paul and his companions to stay with them for seven days. They wanted God's servants to stay over at least one Sunday so that all the church could meet them and hear them preach the gospel of God's free grace in Christ.

THE BRETHREN FROM ROME WHO CAME OUT TO MEET PAUL GREATLY ENCOURAGED HIM (v. 15). By one means or another the saints at Rome heard that Paul, who had written to them long before, came out to meet him. They had never met before, except in spirit. Yet, they showed great love for God's servant. They were of the same family. They all loved the same Savior. So they loved each other. Paul thanked God for them and was encouraged by them. They seem to have cheered and inspired the old warrior for the battles he was yet to face. Someone said, "A church should be a fellowship of encouragement." That is exactly what these Roman believers were to Paul. Here is an interesting sidelight—The word translated "meet" in verse 15 is also found in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 where we are given a beautiful picture of the resurrection of God's saints. When Christ comes again, the dead in Christ will rise first and we who are alive shall be caught up with them to meet the Lord in the air that we may return with him to his new creation!

AT LAST, PAUL WAS DELIVERED AS A PRISONER TO ROME (v. 16). He came to Rome as a prisoner because of his faithfulness to God. There by God's providence, he was given great liberty to preach the gospel, dwelling in a rented house with a guard constantly at his side. At last, Paul had come to Rome to preach the gospel. It seems to have mattered little to him that he came as the prisoner of Rome. As far as he was concerned, he had come there as the prisoner of Jesus Christ by the will of God. He seized the opportunity now set before him to preach the gospel and to write a good portion of the New Testament. Knowing that God had brought him there and that God would use him there, Paul was content, even in Rome (Philippians 4:12). Would you be?

82. "THE HOPE OF ISRAEL"

Acts 28:17–20

Three days after he was delivered to Rome as a prisoner, Paul called the Jews of Rome together. Though despised and abused by them, he never failed to demonstrate genuine compassion for his countrymen. It was ever his prayer and heart's desire for Israel that they might be saved (Romans 10:1). Such compassion for those nearest us is exemplary. It is not selfishness, but the most reasonable expression of love to seek salvation and eternal life in Christ for those God has placed in the nearest relationship to us. If a man does not use his influence to reach those who are most under his influence, he is not likely to earnestly seek the salvation of others. If God does not save those whom we naturally love, we must not murmur and complain. He is sovereign. It is his right to do what he will and to give salvation to whom he will. However, knowing full well that none deserve God's mercy, it would be barbaric for us to let any perish without seeking the salvation of their souls.

Once he called these Jews together, Paul told them exactly why he had been brought to Rome as a prisoner. He had broken no law, cast no reproach upon the Jewish nation, and done nothing in violation of the Holy Scriptures. Paul assured the Jews of his innocence, hoping that they might more readily receive his message. He wanted to remove from their minds anything that might keep them from hearing the gospel he preached. Then, in verse 20, he told them why he had been arrested and brought to Rome and why he had called them together to speak to them. Paul had been arrested and was now a prisoner at Rome for only one reason—Preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. He had proclaimed to men "the hope of Israel". He had frankly declared to men that one of whom all the prophets spoke, in whom all the promises of God must be fulfilled, in whom Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the saints of the Old Testament hoped and for whom they waited, the Messiah, the King, the Son of David, the Seed of Abraham, the true Prophet, the true Priest, the true Sacrifice, the true Redeemer of Israel has come, and he is Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. For preaching this Christ, Paul stood before these men a prisoner in chains. He had called these Jews together so that he could preach Christ to them. In this passage, Paul identifies the Lord Jesus Christ as "the hope of Israel". That is a subject that needs to be understood.

WHO IS ISRAEL? Though Paul was addressing men who were by physical birth the descendants of Abraham, they were not part of that Israel of whom Paul spoke. They had no faith in Christ. They were Jews outwardly, but not inwardly. They were a part of the physical nation of Israel. But they were not part of that "holy nation" called "the Israel of God". Be sure you understand this—The promises of God's covenant and the blessings of his grace were never intended for Abraham's natural seed. Grace does not come by natural descent. Mercy does not run in families, neither to Jews nor to Gentiles (John 1:11–13; Romans 9:16). Many imagine that the Jews as a nation and race have a special claim upon God's promises and that God deals with them in a special way. That is a myth. It is entirely contrary to the gospel of God's free and sovereign grace in Christ. It is plainly written in Holy Scripture that there are no promises to natural Israel that God has not fulfilled. He fulfilled them all a long, long time ago. Read Joshua 21:44–45. God gave Israel alone the gospel in the Old Testament, under the types and shadows of the law. Then God sent his Son to preach to them. Even after they crucified the Lord of glory, our Savior, sent his apostles to the Jews first. But after that nation despised Christ and his gospel, in righteous judgment God destroyed them (Matthew 22:1–7). In great mercy, he sent his gospel to the Gentiles that he might gather his elect (his Israel) from the four corners of the earth. This has always been his purpose (Acts 28:26–28; Romans 11:25–26). The physical seed of Abraham are not the special, chosen people of God. The Scriptures are crystal clear in this regard (Romans 2:28; 9:6–8; Galatians 4:22–28).

All who believe the gospel of Christ, Jews and Gentiles of every age, are "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). Every true believer is a child of Abraham, an Israelite indeed (Romans 2:29; Galatians 3:6–7; Philippians 3:3). The blessing of Abraham comes to men by the redeeming blood of Christ and the saving power of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:13–14). The characteristics of God's Israel are not physical, but spiritual. Being circumcised in their hearts, they worship God in the Spirit, trust Christ alone as their Savior, and have no confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:3; Colossians 2:11). Like Abraham, they believe God (John 8:39). All the promises and blessings of God's covenant and grace belong to all the Israel of God, all who trust the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20; Galatians 3:13–18, 26–29; Ephesians 1:3–6; 2:11–14; 2 Timothy 1:9).

WHY IS THE LORD JESUS CHRIST CALLED "THE HOPE OF ISRAEL"? Paul called him by this title because the prophets referred to the Messiah by this title (Jeremiah 14:8; 17:13; Joel 3:16). And he is called by this title because all the Israel of God recognize that Christ alone is our hope of everlasting salvation (1 Timothy 1:1; Colossians 1:27). Every believer looks to Christ in faith, hoping for (expecting) grace, salvation, and eternal glory in him (Romans 8:24–25). We understand and rejoice in the fact that he is our salvation (Luke 2:30; Romans 8:33–39). The whole work of salvation was finished for us by Christ's obedience to God in life and in death (John 17:4; 19:28–30). It is complete and perfect in him (Colossians 2:10). And this salvation that is in Christ alone is the free gift of God's grace bestowed upon every sinner who, like Abraham, believes God (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8–9).

Every true Israelite, every true believer, lives by faith in Christ in the hope and expectation of eternal life. We have it now; but we do not yet enjoy the full perfection of it. We are not yet in Heaven. We have not yet been glorified. But believing Christ, we have confidence that we shall be (Titus 2:11–12; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; 1 John 3:1–3). When the Lord Jesus Christ comes again, the whole Israel of God shall be raised in his likeness!

WHAT DOES ISRAEL HOPE TO OBTAIN FROM CHRIST? Believing him, we hope to obtain everything that Christ, our God-man Mediator, is and everything he has obtained from God as the reward of his obedience. I fully believe that there is nothing that Christ is, in his mediatorial capacity, and nothing that he has obtained that we shall not be and have. We shall never share his divinity. We will not become God! But all that his glorious humanity is and has, we shall be and have by virtue of our union with him (John 17:5, 22). It is not yet seen. But this is that for which we hope (Romans 8:17–18, 24–25). He is freed from all sin, perfectly righteous and holy, perfectly satisfied, completely at rest, in perfect harmony with the triune God, possessing all things! All of that we shall be when he makes all things new!

WHAT IS THE BASIS OF ISRAEL'S HOPE? Read Lamentations 3:21–26. The old prophet cries, "This I recall to my mind. Therefore have I hope." Then he tells us what his hope is:

"It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord."

Here are two things we must do who have hope in God's mercies, compassions, faithfulness, and goodness. We must live a while longer in hope. Hope can see Heaven through the thickest clouds. Hope is the mother of patience. If we live in hope, expecting God to do what he has promised he will do, we will "quietly (patiently) wait for the salvation of the Lord". Nothing can greatly disturb the peace of one who lives in hope. He is waiting for the salvation of the Lord!

83. "SOME BELIEVED AND SOME BELIEVED NOT"

Acts 28:21–24

Wherever Paul went, he had but one errand. He was a gospel preacher, a messenger, an ambassador sent from God with a message to deliver to eternity bound sinners. Being "separated unto the gospel" (Romans 1:1), he allowed nothing to turn him aside from his great work, not even imprisonment! He was sent of God to deliver the message of redemption and grace in Christ to perishing souls. He considered nothing to be of equal importance. Being God's messenger, his message was always the same. His subject, his theme never changed. He was determined to know nothing among men except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). He considered it his solemn duty, whenever and wherever he preached, to preach the gospel 1 Corinthians 9:16). He was a man of one subject. He was radically, fanatically committed to that one subject. He preached Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23). Whatever ability he possessed, whenever he had opportunity, this great exemplary preacher expounded to men and women the doctrine of the cross (Galatians 6:14). In the passage before us, Luke gives us an example both of the great apostle's message and his method of preaching.

PAUL PREACHED EXPOSITIONALLY. "He expounded both out of the law of Moses and out of the prophets." All true preaching involves the faithful exposition of Holy Scripture. Preaching is not the exposition of a creed or confession of faith. That is denominational indoctrination. Preaching is declaring with simplicity and clarity that which is written in Holy Scripture. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." (Romans 10:17). It is not possible for anyone to trust the Lord Jesus Christ until he is taught of God. And the method by which God teaches chosen sinners is the preaching of the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:21; 1 Peter 1:23–25). It is the responsibility of those who preach the gospel to unfold the wondrous mysteries of the gospel, faithfully expounding the message of the Bible. Many preachers and teachers like to dazzle their hearers with their knowledge and understanding of facts and times and their ability to answer foolish questions and unravel the knots of endless genealogies. God's servants studiously avoid getting caught up in that snare of the devil (2 Timothy 2:23; Titus 3:9). Those men who are faithful to God, faithful to the souls of men, and faithful to the Word of God expound the message of Scripture. Essentially, the message of the Bible is threefold.

The first message of the Bible is a message of ruin, the total spiritual ruin of our race by the sin and fall of our father Adam (Romans 5:12). What happened in the garden? Let a man find the answer to that question and he will have little difficulty understanding anything else in the Bible. Adam was much more than the progenitor of our race. He was, by God's decree, the federal head and representative of all men. God made Adam in his own image, holy and righteous, and gave him dominion over all the works of his hands. Adam and his children might have lived forever in that happy condition, had he simply lived in the acknowledgment of God's righteous dominion over him. God gave Adam everything except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (

Genesis 2:15–17). That one tree stood as a constant reminder to Adam of God's rightful, sovereign dominion. You know what happened. Adam did not stand in his uprightness. In time, his heart swelled with pride. He could not stand the thought of God being God. Because of his pride, he stole the fruit of God's tree. By that act, Adam attempted to usurp God's authority and dominion as God. Immediately he died spiritually, came under the curse of legal death, began to die physically, and became liable to eternal death in Hell; and so did we! When Adam sinned, we sinned in him. When he died, we died. Now we all bear the image of our father Adam. All the sons of Adam are born sinners, rebels against God, going astray as soon as they are born speaking lies (Psalm 51:5; 58:3; Romans 3:9–19; 8:7; Ephesians 2:1–3). This is the doctrine of total depravity. It simply means man is so sinful and so completely helpless in spiritual death that he is incapable of changing his condition, or even assisting in the change of his condition before God (Jeremiah 13:23; 17:9). "Man is a double dyed villain. He is originally corrupted by nature and afterwards by practice" (A. H. Strong).

The second message of the Bible is a message of redemption, redemption by the precious blood of Christ, the second Adam (2 Corinthians 5:18–21; Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 1:18–20; 2:24). Thank God there is a second Adam, another representative Man, another Substitute! In exactly the same way that all men were made sinners by Adam's disobedience, all God's elect are made righteous by Christ's obedience unto death as their Substitute (Romans 5:17–21; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22). By his obedience to the law as our Representative, Christ brought in perfect righteousness, which is imputed to all who trust him. By that righteousness, we are completely justified in God's sight (Jeremiah 23:6; Romans 3:28–31; 4:21–25). Our works have nothing to do with our righteousness. We are justified by his work being imputed to us. By pouring out his life's blood unto death, our Savior made a complete atonement for sin, satisfying the justice of God for all who believe on him (Romans 3:24–26). Now, God freely forgives all who trust his Son, justly removing from us both the guilt of sin and the curse of the law (John 3:14–18; Romans 8:1, 33, 34).

The third message of the Bible is a message of regeneration, regeneration by the irresistible grace and power of God the Holy Spirit (John 3:3–8; Ephesians 2:1–4). This is the new birth. It is not something God offers. It is something God does. Eternal life is the gift of God. The fruit and result of the new birth, this gift of life, is faith in Christ. In order for dead sinners to live, they must be given life. And when God creates life in us, he also creates faith in us (Ephesians 2:8–9; Colossians 2:12).

PAUL PREACHED EXPERIMENTALLY AS WELL AS EXPOSITIONALLY. As he expounded the message of Holy Scripture, "He testified the kingdom of God." He told his hearers how he had experienced the transforming power and grace of God on the Damascus road. He told his conversion experience so often that I imagine Luke and anyone else who frequently heard him preach knew it as well as he did (Acts 9:1–22; 22:1–16; 26:9–19). He never tired of telling what God had done for him. Grace experienced in the heart is a tale worth telling and worth hearing. Someone once said, "No man can really preach anything until he has experienced it." And the man who has experienced grace will preach it.

THIS EXPOSITORY, EXPERIMENTAL PREACHING WAS PERSUASIVE. When Paul preached, he was "persuading them concerning Jesus." He pressed upon his hearers the claims of Christ in the gospel, urging them to trust him as Savior and Lord (2 Corinthians 5:11). "And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not." That is always the result of gospel preaching (2 Corinthians 2:14–16). Three things need to be understood from this fact: (1) The salvation of sinners is not determined by the gifts, abilities, and power of the preacher. Those who believed heard the same preacher as those who believed not. (2) Those who believe the gospel do so because God, who willed it from eternity, gives them faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Read your Bible. Faith is not the work of man's free will, but the gift of God's sovereign grace (John 1:12–13; 3:8; Romans 9:16–18; Ephesians 1:19, 2:8; Colossians 2:12). (3) Those who believe not, believe not because they will not come to Christ and be saved by free grace alone through the merits of his blood and righteousness (John 5:40). If any sinner is saved, it is God's fault and the result of God's work alone. If any sinner is damned, it is his fault and the result of his work alone. No one is saved because of what he does; and no one is lost because of what God does. Salvation is God's work. Destruction is man's work.

84. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PEOPLE REJECT THE GOSPEL?

Acts 28:23–29

"When they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging." It is not at all uncommon for preachers to go to jails and prisons to preach the gospel of Christ to the inhabitants. But here are men, religious men and their leaders, who were summoned by a prisoner that he might preach the gospel to them! "To whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses and out of the prophets, from morning until evening." Paul explained to these men from the Scriptures and his own heart's experience, the nature of God's kingdom. He showed them that, contrary to what they had always been taught, the kingdom of God is not an outward, carnal, earthly empire in which Jews rule the world, but an inward, spiritual, heavenly dominion of hearts and lives by the Lord Jesus Christ. Entrance into the kingdom of God is not by birth, but by the new birth (John 3:3–7). The kingdom of God is not a kingdom of pomp and ceremony, but of purity and conversion. Paul also persuaded these men that Jesus is the Christ. Appealing to the Scriptures, his own experience, and reason, he gave irrefutable proof that the crucified Man of Nazareth is indeed the Christ, the Son of God. He told them of the Savior's eternal deity, his incarnation, and life of obedience, his death as the sinners' Substitute, and his resurrection, ascension, and exaltation as Lord of all. He carefully explained to them the glorious gospel doctrine of salvation by grace through Christ, the sinners' Substitute. He showed them how that the Son of God brought in everlasting righteousness by his obedience to God as a Man and made atonement for chosen sinners by his death upon the cursed tree. He told them of Christ's dominion as a Priest upon the throne, his heavenly intercession, and his glorious second advent. Paul urged these men, his kinsman, to repent, to trust Christ and be saved by his grace. But when the sermon was over, "some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not." Christ is set for the fall of some and the rising again of others. To some he is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence. To others he is the sure Foundation Stone and the Rock of Salvation. Our Lord Jesus came not to bring peace but a sword (Matthew 10:34). This is the sword of division that he brings. Some believe the gospel when they hear it and some blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. The light is set before them, but they shut their eyes. The truth is proclaimed to them, but they stop their ears. The love, mercy, grace, and glory of God in Jesus Christ is affectionately preached to them, but they harden their hearts. "And when they agreed not among themselves, they departed after that Paul had spoken one word." These men could not agree among themselves, but they had had enough of Paul's doctrine. As they were getting up to leave in disgust and anger, Paul seems to have said, "Hold on, I have one more thing to tell you before you go. I must tell you what the result of your obstinate unbelief will be." Then we read, "Well spoke the Holy Spirit by Isaiah the prophet unto our fathers, Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing you shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing you shall see, and not perceive: For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it. And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves." Because these Jews despised the light of the gospel and rejected the claims of Christ, God withdrew the light of the gospel from them and fixed it so that they could not come to Christ and be saved. Though they were still alive, these men were eternally damned! The lessons we are taught in this passage are of immense importance.

THE CAUSE OF REPROBATION IS WILLFUL UNBELIEF, THE WILLFUL REJECTION OF REVEALED TRUTH (verses 25–27). The gospel promises, "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:16). "Whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13). But anytime men and women hear the gospel preached in the power of the Holy Spirit and believe it not, they are courting eternal reprobation (Luke 13:23–30). Reprobation is the judgment of God that falls upon men and women because of their willful rejection of the gospel (Proverbs 1:23–33; 29:1; Hosea 4:17; Matthew 21:28–46; 23:37–38). Like Pharaoh of old, these Jews hardened their hearts against the gospel of Christ. Therefore, God hardened their hearts in unbelief, as he said he would (Isaiah 6:9–10; Romans 11:8). Prophet after prophet had been sent to them from one generation to another. At last, God sent one more apostle to preach Christ to them. But "the heart of this people waxed gross!" Hardening their hearts against the message of free grace salvation through a crucified substitute, they refused to hear. "Their ears were dull of hearing." Being convinced of the truthfulness of Paul's message, but full of enmity toward God, they refused to bow to the claims of Christ. Proud, self-righteous men who will not deny their own merits and seek to be saved by trusting the merits of Christ, willfully shut their eyes to the glory of God in the face of Christ. "Their eyes have they closed" (

Romans 9:31–33). Because these men willfully despised the gospel and rejected the claims of Christ in it, God left them alone. They would not believe. So God fixed it so that they could not believe. God will not trifle with those who trifle with his Son (Jeremiah 7:16). Man's condemnation is the result of willful unbelief. Matthew Henry was exactly right when he warned, "Let all that hear the gospel, and do not heed it, tremble at this doom; for, when once they are given up to hardness of heart, they are already in the suburbs of Hell!" Judicial reprobation is the just response of God to man's willful suppression and rejection of undeniable, revealed truth (Romans 1:18–28; 2 Thessalonians 2:10–12).

GOD'S METHOD OF GRACE IS ALWAYS THE SAME (v. 27). Even as Paul announced terrible judgment upon the reprobate, he tells us plainly what God's method of grace is. When God saves sinners, it is necessary that "they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them." God never deviates from his ordained means of grace. (1.) The Lord God causes every sinner whom he intends to save to hear the gospel of Christ. God does not save his elect apart from the preaching of the gospel. Faith is not a leap in the dark. It is the response of the heart to the Word of God. By one means or another, God will cause the chosen to be instructed in the gospel. Yes, God could save his people without the use of human instrumentality. There is no question about that. But he has chosen not to do so (Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:23; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23–25). (2.) Through the preaching of the Word, by the power of his Holy Spirit, God causes chosen sinners to "see with their eyes," to see the Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation comes by divine revelation (Galatians 1:15–16). No one will trust Christ until they see him, until he is revealed in them by the power and grace of God the Holy Spirit. And all who see him are irresistibly drawn to him (Zechariah 12:10; 13:1). (3.) God saves sinners by giving them understanding hearts. By his Spirit, God teaches his elect all things necessary to life and faith in Christ (John 6:44–45; 1 John 2:20, 27). (4.) When God saves a sinner by his grace, he converts him. The grace of God that brings salvation causes rebels to bow before his throne as willing servants. Grace conquers the will, subdues the passions, and reconciles the heart to God (1 Thessalonians 1:4–10). (5.) When God saves sinners, he heals them of the deadly plague of their hearts. That is to say, he causes the dead to live, delivering them from the bondage, dominion, and death of sin (Ezekiel 16:8).

GOD'S PURPOSE OF GRACE IS IMMUTABLE (v. 28). We grieve to see multitudes perish by their own obstinance and willful unbelief. But we rejoice to know that man's unbelief does not defeat or in anyway alter the purpose of God (Romans 3:3–4). "The foundation of God stands sure!" Though he withdraws his goodness from the unbelieving reprobate, there is an elect people in this world to whom the gospel must be sent. And they will believe on Christ (Isaiah 56:8; John 10:16). All the Israel of God must be saved (Romans 11:26). Frequently, the unbelief of some is the instrumental cause of faith in others by the wise arrangement of God's sovereign providence (Romans 11:11, 25, 26, 33–36). All who were chosen by God the Father in eternity, were redeemed by God the Son at Calvary, and shall be called by God the Spirit at the appointed time of love.

85. PAUL'S LAST TWO YEARS

Acts 28:30–31

The Spirit of God inspired Luke to describe Paul's last two years in very simple, but instructive words. "And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him" (verses 30–31). There are many traditions about Paul and his ministry after he came to Rome, but the Lord has told us nothing more than is contained in those two verses. Most likely, at the end of these two years, Paul was executed at Rome by Nero, dying as a martyr for Christ. In this study we will summarize the message of the Book of Acts, review Paul's last two years as a prisoner at Rome, and draw some lessons from the things we have seen in the Book of Acts.

THE BOOK OF ACTS CONSTANTLY FOCUSES OUR ATTENTION ON FIVE THINGS THAT MUST NEVER BE OVERLOOKED. Throughout these twenty-eight chapters, Luke draws our attention to these five things. Let us lay them to heart.

(1) THE PROVIDENTIAL RULE OF CHRIST—Luke opens this brief history of the early church by declaring the ascension and exaltation of Christ as Lord over all things. Then he proceeds to show us how that the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, rules the universe to accomplish his will. The abuses, imprisonments, persecutions, and hardships suffered by those early believers were constantly overruled by our Lord for the spiritual, eternal good of his church and for the salvation of his elect. Throughout these chapters, we have seen that all things worked together for good to them that loved God, to them who were the called, according to his purpose. The providential rule of Christ over all things sustained God's children in confident hope through all they suffered and did for his name's sake. Let all who trust Christ ever trust and rejoice in his sovereign rule of the universe. If Christ who is our Head rules all things, then all is well. No matter how things may for the moment appear, our Savior is accomplishing his will, for his glory and our good in all things (John 17:2; Ephesians 1:20–23).

(2) THE MISSION OF GOD'S CHURCH IN THIS WORLD—The church of Christ has been given a definite commission from him. It is our responsibility to carry out that commission. Our Lord said, "You shall be witnesses unto me unto the uttermost part of the earth" (1:8). Every believer is a missionary sent of God to confess Christ to men, to carry the message of his greatness, grace, and glory to perishing sinners. Every local church is to be a preaching center from which the gospel of Christ is proclaimed to dying men. Let us renew our commitment to this cause. As the early church went everywhere preaching that Jesus is Lord, let us give our lives to this cause. It is not the mission of God's church to entertain the world, educate the world, heal the world, reform the world, or govern the world. Our singular mission from Christ is to preach the gospel to the world.

(3) THE OFFENSE OF THE CROSS—From the very beginning, God's people have been persecuted by the world. As Cain persecuted Abel and Ishmael persecuted Isaac, the religious world persecuted the church of God in the earliest days of Christianity. The cause of persecution was the message the church declared—salvation by God's free grace through Jesus Christ the Lord! Things are no different today. We do not experience the physical violence that our brethren endured in those days; but the message we preach is just as hated and despised by religionists today as it was when Peter and John were imprisoned and Stephen was stoned to death. The doctrine of the cross is an offense to man. We must never expect unconverted men to love the truth of God. As the natural heart is enmity against God, the natural heart hates the gospel of God's free and sovereign grace in Christ. If we preach the gospel, we must not expect anything but wrath and persecution from those who despise the gospel. While the world stands, the offence of the cross will not cease (Galatians 5:11).

(4) THE VITAL MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT—Our Lord said, "Without me you can do nothing." What he said of himself is equally true of God the Holy Spirit. We must have the Spirit of God! If the Holy Spirit does not work in us and by us, we can do nothing for the glory of Christ and the eternal good of men. As we read the book of Acts, we are constantly reminded that the ministry of the early church was the ministry of God the Holy Spirit. Let us ever seek his gracious wisdom, power, and grace upon us. If we would worship, pray, sing, or do anything for the glory of God, we must be motivated, guided, and governed by God the Holy Spirit. Without him, we can do nothing.

(5) THE IMMUTABILITY OF GOD'S PURPOSE—Throughout this book, we see the purpose of God being accomplished exactly as he would have it. Though all Hell resists it, our God performs his will. He is not even slightly hindered by the opposition of men or of Satan himself. "The foundation of God stands sure!" Child of God, rejoice! Let nothing discourage you. Let nothing hinder you from doing the will of God. God is faithful. Our God will graciously accomplish his purpose in us and in all things for the glory of his own great name. These are the things we see constantly set before us in the book of Acts. May God keep them always before us and use them to sustain our hearts as we seek to serve his cause in this world.

PAUL'S TWO YEARS OF IMPRISONMENT AT ROME ARE FULL OF INSTRUCTION. Remember, Paul had done nothing wrong. He was a prisoner at Rome only because he would not be turned aside from what he knew God would have him to do (Acts 20:22–24; 21:10–14). He was a prisoner for two years under Felix. His trip to Rome took at least a year. Then he was held prisoner at Rome for two more years. In all, this faithful man was under constant guard for the last five years of his life. He looked upon his imprisonment as he did all other things, as an act of God's wise and good providence. He knew that God had brought him to Rome in bonds for the furtherance of the gospel (Philippians 1:12–14). During these two years of imprisonment, Paul did not mope around complaining about how bad things were for him, or talk glowingly of all he had done for Christ, or dream about what he would do in better circumstances. Instead, he used the time and abilities God gave him for the glory of Christ, the good of immortal souls, and the furtherance of the gospel. While a prisoner at Rome, this servant of God wrote half the Epistles of the New Testament, preached to and trained Onesimus in the faith of Christ, and preached the gospel to some in Nero's house and to his guards. As a result of what Paul did during those last two years, untold millions have been converted. God knew what he was doing when he brought Paul to Rome in chains; and Paul knew that God knew what he was doing (

Romans 8:28–30). Therefore he was content (Philippians 4:1–13). Carefully read what Paul wrote during this time and what Luke says of his behavior. You will not find a single word to indicate any dissatisfaction on his part. Trusting God's providence, he was submissive, thankful, and patient to the end. When the time came for him to leave this world, he was ready (2 Timothy 4:6–8).

WHAT SHOULD WE LEARN FROM THE THINGS WE HAVE SEEN? Much time could be wisely spent drawing out numerous lessons from just the last two years of Paul's life and ministry. Many more might be found if one takes the time to review the twenty-eight chapters of this book. But, overall, three lessons seem to leap out of these pages of inspiration.

1. Learn to trust God's providence (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28).

2. Learn to do what God gives you the ability and opportunity to do for the glory of Christ and the good of immortal souls (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

3. Learn this too—All who honor God shall be honored by God (1 Samuel 2:30).